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The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Fan Translation
Saekisan
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Mahiru Shiina

“That was fun.”
After saying their goodbyes, Amane and Mahiru strolled hand in hand as they followed their usual route home.

Anime V1 Blu-ray Visual

(@Hanekoto2424)

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

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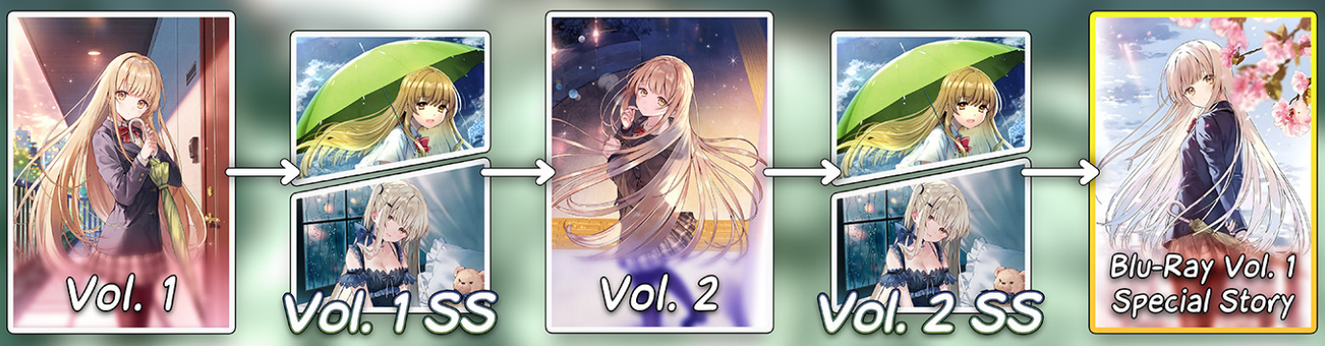

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten Release Date

Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to his girlfriend—an angel. Working hard to save up money to buy his girlfriend a certain precious item. Always dedicated and considerate, he supports his girlfriend however he can.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next her beloved boyfriend. A devoted, diligent, and sweet girl. Made Valentine's Day chocolate for her boyfriend with her loving hand. Wants to see Amane working.

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

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Chapter 1

Valentine's Night

"I know it's a little late, but here's your chocolate for this year."

After clearing away her lingering unease over Amane being confessed to, Mahiru finished her meal and hurriedly offered him a box. She was nervous with a slightly tense expression.

"Thanks," Amane smiled. "I feel kind of bad having you go out of your way to make it by hand."

"You say that, but we both know you'd be happier with something I made myself."

"Well, yeah, of course. I've been looking forward to it this year."

Everything Mahiru made was delicious, so Amane wasn't worried about the taste. Knowing she had put extra effort into this made him even more excited to try it.

Mahiru tended to be a perfectionist. If it was for Amane, she would go through multiple trial runs to get a result she was happy with. Still, he didn't have to worry about her overindulging and worrying about her weight like she had on his birthday, which was a relief.

He accepted the box from her with a look of pure excitement. Yet, Mahiru lowered her head with an upset look.

"So you weren't looking forward to it last year…?"

That's *what she was worried about?* Amane couldn't help but chuckle at her murmur.

"Well, I didn't think I'd be getting any. I wasn't hoping to, either."

This time last year, dating Mahiru hadn't even crossed Amane's mind. He could tell she trusted him enough to let him into her life, but he wasn't confident enough to believe they were close enough for her to gift him chocolate.

He never expected to receive anything from her, nor had he hoped to. That was precisely why he'd been so surprised—and, of course, happy—when she actually did.

Despite that, Mahiru repeated his words quietly. *"You weren't hoping to get any…"*

She had taken his response the wrong way. Sensing the potential misunderstanding, Amane quickly leaned in to peek at her face.

"That's not what I meant, Mahiru. To me, Valentine's Day was just another day. I didn't even think I was in the running to receive anything."

Romance wasn't on Amane's mind at the time. He was convinced he lacked the charm to make someone interested in him. It might be a different story now that he'd stepped up his game, but back then? There was no way he had the confidence to believe he'd be getting chocolate from anyone.

"I'd have been delusional to think I'd get chocolate from you back then. Don't you think?"

"…M-maybe so, but did you genuinely never consider the possibility? Not even for a second?"

"Not at all. In my defense, you were a completely different person back then."

Now, Mahiru was utterly sweet toward Amane. She didn't even try to hide how much she adored him. But back then, she had been as cold as ice. She obviously didn't like him in a romantic sense, either. To Amane, their relationship at the time felt more like that of close friends. Receiving Valentine's chocolate wasn't a possibility he considered. He'd also heard that Mahiru never gave chocolates to guys. Thinking he might get one despite that fact would have been nothing short of delusional.

Amane answered honestly while recalling how she'd acted all that time ago. Sure enough, his answer left Mahiru displeased. Her pouting lips looked so adorable that he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Keep making that cute face, and I just might take a bite out of you," Amane joked.

"Huh?" Mahiru blurted.

"I'm kidding… I already got my fill earlier, and we'd be in trouble if your lips got swollen."

Before dinner, he'd indulged in an unorthodox kind of sweetness. Mahiru's lips were slightly fuller and rosier than usual. She quickly pressed a finger to them, and her body shook. Then, she looked up at Amane with a face even redder than before.

"Wh-whose fault do you think that would be…?"

"*Mine*."

Mahiru's small hands smacked his arm when he admitted it without missing a beat. But since it didn't hurt, he let her do as she pleased until she got it out of her system.

"Sorry, sorry… I didn't bite down hard."

"Amane-kun, you kiss me so much when you get carried away… I don't like it."

"You don't?"

"…I *don't*."

"I see. That's too bad."

Amane knew she wasn't being serious. He wasn't one to assume that *no* meant *yes*, but Mahiru wasn't truly objecting to what he'd done in this case. He would never push her to do something she didn't want.

"A–anyway, I tried my very best to make these this year. I hope it suits your tastes."

Deciding that was enough of that conversation for today, Mahiru swiftly returned to the topic at hand and shifted her focus to the box in Amane's hands.

She'd given Amane a rectangular, cream-colored box wrapped in chocolate-brown ribbon. When he gave it a light shake, it made a faint rustling sound, suggesting multiple pieces were inside. Judging by size, it had plenty of chocolate.

Instead of chocolate-flavored sweets, Mahiru made something with chocolate as the main star this year. That explained the thumping sound the box made.

"I'll be a happy man no matter what, but…knowing you made this with my tastes in mind makes me even more excited. Can I open it?"

"Yes, go ahead. I'd be troubled if you didn't," Mahiru nodded, urging him on.

Amane carefully untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. Inside, about ten glossy pieces of chocolate were neatly arranged in a grid.

Each piece was a perfect square, but they varied slightly in looks. There were different shades of brown, likely due to varying cocoa percentages, while some pieces were topped with nuts or decorated wonderfully with thin chocolate lines.

What surprised Amane the most were the chocolates with striking and intricate patterns. It was a technique he'd only ever seen at high-end patisseries. The fancy patterns were a testament to how much effort had gone into making them.

In the best way possible, they didn't feel handmade. The chocolates were crafted so impeccably well that they wouldn't be out of place being sold as luxury confections.

"…These *are* handmade, right?"

"Why don't you believe me?!"

"No, I do…they're just so perfect. They look phenomenal."

"I made bonbon chocolates, so I put extra care into polishing their appearance. That said, the transfer sheets I used did much of the heavy lifting," Mahiru puffed out her chest proudly. "Looks like my effort paid off."

Hasn't she gone a bit overboard here? Amane thought. *I'm still grateful, though, of course.*

"No, I'm sure it wasn't just the… Wait, don't tell me these all have different—"

"Yes, they *all* have a different flavor," Mahiru replied proudly as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Amane was amazed. He could only shake his head in wonder. He'd noticed a sweet aroma following her before Valentine's Day and had assumed she'd been doing some culinary experiments, but he never expected her to go this far.

"…You went the whole nine yards. Thank you, Mahiru. I'm super happy."

"Hehe, it's too soon to be praising me just yet. The real test is the *taste*—go on, try one," Mahiru urged with an eager sparkle in her eyes.

Guided by her enthusiasm, Amane eyed up one of the chocolates in the box. The first piece he would have today.

Each piece gleamed under the light, boasting a flawless sheen. Not a single one had the slightly matte texture of typical handmade chocolates. Amane had heard that melting chocolate the wrong way could ruin its appearance and texture, but the chocolates in his hand had no such imperfections.

"Is there a specific order to eat these?"

"I'd like to say you can eat them however you like…but I actually recommend trying the pieces with delicate flavors first. Like this one and that one," Mahiru said, pointing to specific pieces of chocolate.

"I'll gladly follow the chef's recommendation," Amane replied.

The best way to eat was as the creator recommended. Amane picked up a piece Mahiru had pointed to and took a careful bite.

As soon as it graced his tongue, a rich bitterness and refreshing citrus aroma permeated his mouth. It wasn't just the chocolate; the citrus added to the bitter flavor. Despite that, it was far from unpleasant. The flavors were balanced perfectly to accentuate the sweet flavor beneath the bitterness. There was no harsh, lingering astringency, just a clean yet layered bitterness that added depth to the taste.

As the bitterness faded, sweetness and tang soon followed. The fine-tuned flavors ensured that even someone without a sweet tooth could enjoy it. It left behind the rich density unique to chocolate but without cloying sweetness.

"Man, that's good."

Amane wasn't flattering her or exaggerating. That was his honest live reaction. Amane had a high bar in matters of taste, but could give this item his greatest praises. He popped the remaining half into his mouth without even thinking. The flavors bloomed on his tongue, and the sheer bliss filling his senses made his eyes narrow in joy.

"Did it suit your taste?"

"Of course. It's insanely good. Not too sweet, but not too bitter either. I can tell you tried to strike the perfect balance."

"Hehe, I've got a pretty good understanding of your palate by now. I made these to be just right for you."

"Huh? Wait, so now you've captured not only my stomach but my taste

buds too?"

A shiver shot down Amane's spine. Not only had she nailed his preferences, but she had done so intentionally. He was half in awe and half delighted.

"I've tailored all the other chocolates to match your tastes as well, so you should enjoy whichever one you choose. Now, why don't you try this one next?"

Amane had no chance of victory against Mahiru's mischievous grin. Chuckling softly at her playful gesture, he gladly accepted the next token of affection she pressed gently to his lips—a second piece of chocolate. It was sweet not in flavor, but in feeling.

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Mahiru fed him three pieces as they enjoyed their sweet post-dinner time together.

Once he had finished getting ready for bed, Amane flopped onto his mattress. He'd felt fine earlier, but the moment he stepped out of the bath and settled under the covers, he felt like an anvil had hit him square in the center of his body. He hadn't worked today, so he wasn't exhausted physically. It was mental fatigue dragging him down. His eyelids felt unusually heavy, and sleep crept up on him far quicker than he expected.

He reached for the remote by his bedside with half-shut eyes, forcing his sluggish body to move. Once he managed to grab it, he pressed the button to turn off the lights. His resistance crumbled the moment darkness filled the room. His grip loosened, and the remote slipped from his fingers and onto the bed as his body gave out.

Darkness engulfed his vision, but the day's events played out in his mind with vivid clarity. The girl's trembling face, on the verge of tears yet still managing a smile, was burned into his memory.

…I don't regret anything.

The words he spun in his heart were no lie.

Amane would never choose anyone else. He *could* never choose anyone else. The one he had decided on, the only woman for him, was Mahiru. He could never imagine finding anyone as dear to him as her, nor could he picture wanting anyone else by his side. He needed no one but her.

Amane knew that such devotion might be cruel to everybody else. He knew he had forced the girl to face reality, but he wouldn't have it any other

way.

But just as Mahiru had feared, his heart ached. A faint yet lingering pain.

Amane had drawn a clear line and rejected a girl, knowing full well that she would be hurt. His guilt became a wound he inflicted upon himself.

She was the one who had every right to cry—but she hadn't shed a single tear in front of him. Yet, here he was, acting as if *he* were the one that was hurt. As if *he* had the right to feel wounded.

To choose someone meant discarding everybody else.

Amane had known this would happen from the beginning. He'd made his choice and rejected her. And now he was hurt. It was nothing short of foolish.

But Amane embraced his foolishness.

It was an inescapable part of who he was.

That was why he accepted it without resistance, even as his heart ached. His pain had to be there. Even if Mahiru had feared this outcome and wished to avoid it, Amane had no intention of turning away from it. To be himself, he had to embrace it.

If Itsuki found out, he would probably sigh and say, *"You just love makin' things hard for yourself, don't you?"* But this was something Amane refused to compromise on.

…What should I do from tomorrow?

Since they both knew exactly how it would end, the confession and the rejection were awkward in ways entirely different from a typical scenario.

It had to be done, Amane sighed. Logically, he knew. But a faint haze different from the tightness in his chest still settled in his stomach.

He'd made his choice, and he wouldn't complain about it. He certainly wouldn't let his turmoil show, either. He didn't want Mahiru to worry.

Sighing once more to rid himself of the heaviness in his chest, he took a slow, deep breath, surrendering to the drowsiness slowly claiming him.

Chapter 2

The Day After Valentine's

The next day, Amane went to school wearing his usual expression. He kept his cool while he had breakfast with Mahiru, not wanting to let anything show on his face. Whether she noticed or not, Mahiru didn't say anything about his behavior. Either way, Amane felt relieved that she didn't bring it up.

An unusual sight greeted him when he stepped into the classroom. Chitose had arrived earlier than she usually would and was having a cheerful chat with Ayaka.

Chitose's face lit up when she noticed Amane and Mahiru walk in. She waved her hands enthusiastically with a glowing smile. Seeing her animated reaction, Amane exchanged glances with Mahiru before both of them let out a small chuckle.

"Morning! So, how'd things go yesterday?"

"Good morning, Fujimiya-kun, Shiina-san. You're as tight as ever."

Chitose and Ayaka greeted them with carefree smiles. But strangely, Amane had a nagging feeling that there was something different about their expressions.

"Morning, you two," Amane returned their greetings. "What do you mean *how'd things go*? What do you think could have happened?"

"Oh, that's obvious! Mahirun covers herself in chocolate to seduce you and—"

"…Are you an idiot?"

Chitose started the morning off with a comment so utterly ridiculous that Amane didn't even try to sugarcoat his response. He fired back without a moment's hesitation.

But Chitose wasn't the least bit concerned and simply kept smiling. Next

to her, Ayaka let out a wry chuckle, suggesting that, at the very least, she was on Amane's side.

"How in the world do you even think of this stuff?" Amane said, bewildered.

"Whaaa? It's a common trope!" Chitose quipped.

"You have a lively imagination, Chi-chan…" Ayaka remarked.

"Just call her weird at this point; it's fine."

"She's entertaining…in more ways than one." Ayaka smiled without agreeing or disagreeing. She had completely given up on reining Chitose in, deciding that trying to reason with her would be wasted breath.

"I'm starting to think Chitose reads way too many weird manga or magazines. Like, how does your mind even go there? There's no way Mahiru would ever do something like that."

"Exactly," Mahiru confirmed, "why chocolate, of all things…? Amane-kun isn't particularly fond of sweet things, so I doubt it could make him happy. Plus, it's unsanitary, and wasting food is hardly something to be praised. I would never do such a thing."

"Your serious answers make me realize how dirty my mind was... Ouch!"

"So you *do* realize it was dirty."

"*Eek!*"

Amane stared at Chitose blankly as she squirmed, pressing a hand to her cheek as if embarrassed.

"By the way, have you eaten my chocolates yet?" Chitose inquired.

"Not yet. I only had Mahiru's yesterday."

"Guessed as much. You would've tried Mahirun's first, even if you did have mine. The taste difference would've been brutal, so maybe it's better this way."

"Right…"

Chitose kept a flawlessly straight face despite being responsible for that so-called *"taste difference."* Since he'd eventually have to eat it, Amane had plenty of complaints.

Though despite her jokes, Chitose wasn't trying to do harm. Amane would have been upset if she had given him something putrid, but he knew it was something she enjoyed eating, so he couldn't bring himself to be too

harsh on her.

"…Just to be absolutely sure—I *can* eat it, right?" The sheer destructive power of last year's concoction was still burned into his memory. Amane asked just to make sure.

Chitose puffed out her cheeks, clearly displeased.

"You've been doubting me nonstop since yesterday! I checked with Mahirun and did a bunch of test batches, all right? I toned it down for you, so it's totally edible!" Chitose exclaimed. "…What would you do if it wasn't?"

"I'd melt it in hot milk. That'd offset the taste somewhat…I hope."

Though Chitose had gotten Mahiru's seal of approval, Amane had different spice tolerance levels. If Mahiru had miscalculated his limits, the impact would be disastrous. If that happened, Amane wanted to consume it in some form, no matter how. If nothing else, he hoped she'd permit that.

When he made it clear that he had no intention of wasting it, Chitose looked impressed. She stared at him, taking in his sour expression.

"So you'd still eat it all, huh?"

"Well, it *is* a gift, and you technically—and I do mean *technically*—made it with me in mind… So of course I'd eat it all."

If it were truly inedible, Amane would have no choice but to throw in the towel. But Chitose had made that chocolate specifically for him based on her own preferences. He would've appreciated it if she had toned it down a little, but he was still grateful and intended to eat it as he would anything else.

Of course, that didn't mean he wouldn't complain about it afterward.

"It's a crucial point, so I'll repeat it. Of course, I *totally* made it with you in mind!"

"You only thought about how to impair my tongue, throat, and stomach, didn't you?"

"Ehe~"

"…Don't laugh it off."

"You've always loved surprising people, haven't you, Chi-chan? …But Shiina-san might get mad if you tease Fujimiya-kun too much, you know?" Ayaka said.

"It's fine~ Mahirun supervised everything!"

“Aren’t you glad, Fujimiya-kun? Someone was there to hold Chi-chan back.”

“You can say that again. Either way, I’ll take my time eating it. If it’s not fit for human consumption, though, I’ll throw it out and report you to the authorities.”

“I’d never go that far!” Chitose screeched.

“You two sure are lively this morning, eh?”

As Chitose pouted and denied the possibility of Amane’s hypothetical scenario, Itsuki walked in. The thick scarf around his neck obscured part of his face. A faint, knowing smirk played on his lips.

The moment her boyfriend appeared, Chitose’s eyes sparkled with joy. But from the way Itsuki walked in, Amane could already tell—if she was hoping for reinforcements, she was out of luck.

“Ikkun, Amane’s being so mean! He keeps doubting me!”

“…What’s this about?”

“Yesterday’s chocolates!”

“Right. You reap what you sow.”

Itsuki spared no mercy to his beloved girlfriend. He turned to Amane and gave him a sympathetic look that said, *“You’ve also got it rough, huh?”*

Amane wished he’d stopped Chitose before she finished making the chocolates instead.

“Are you even on my side…?” Chitose cried. “Poor me.”

“This time, I’m on Amane’s. And that’s ’cause I had to taste test what you made.”

Itsuki had, of course, received chocolates from Chitose. But since he’d also been drafted as a taste tester for the batch she made for Amane, that put him squarely on Amane’s side. Considering Itsuki’s vocabulary had been reduced to vague phrases like “Damn” and “Sick,” Amane’s caution was justified. Doubting Chitose was just the logical response.

“You guys are so mean…” Chitose wept.

“You sure? Guys, who’s *really* being mean here…?”

“Chi is.”

“Chi-chan.”

“Chitose-san, I think…”

“Even *Mahirun*?!”

Chitose had no allies.

“I watched you from start to finish, so I know exactly how far you pushed the flavor to its limits. You went all out, even when I tried to stop you. I don’t blame Amane-kun for being suspicious.”

“Waaah…!” Chitose cried.

“…Well, it is still edible. You can rest easy.”

Mahiru ignored Chitose’s fake crying and offered Amane a bright, pleasant smile.

Since Mahiru had reassured him, Amane held out hope that it wouldn’t wreak havoc on his stomach. But in the end, that all depended on, quite literally, just how much spice Chitose had decided to throw in.

“You ate it like it was nothing, Mahirun.”

“I have a fairly high tolerance, and I enjoy spicy food. But since Amane-kun isn’t particularly fond of spice, I imagine it will be challenging for him.”

“Right… A Valentine’s gift that’s scary to eat? What kind of deal is that…? Mahiru, stay by my side when I try it, okay?”

“I’ll have some milk ready. You should have yogurt first to protect your stomach lining.”

“I feel way more nervous now…”

The fact that he now had to worry about potentially damaging his stomach filled Amane with dread. But he couldn’t back out now. He decided to pick up some dairy products on the way home to prepare for the worst.

Adding milk and yogurt to his mental shopping list for after his shift, he absently rubbed his stomach. Chitose mumbled, “You don’t have to be that cautious…” but he ignored her, heading to his locker to put away his coat.

Just imagining it made his stomach burn. Right as he sighed and slipped off his coat, he locked eyes with Hibiya and Konishi, who had just arrived.

“Morning,” Amane greeted.

“Good morning, Fujimiya-kun.”

“G-good morning…”

They exchanged morning greetings like normal.

Amane kept to himself, but he had no problem greeting or making small talk with his classmates when he ran into them. No matter who they were.

Amane greeted Hibiya and Konishi as normally as he could, and save for Konishi's red eyes, they responded just as they always did. Amane noticed this but didn't bring it up. Instead, he waved casually and turned to his locker while distracting himself from the dull ache in his heart.

Nobody was going to mention what had transpired yesterday. Especially Konishi, though she looked more jittery than usual. Hibiya also seemed to notice but said nothing. She gently nudged Konishi's shoulder, urging her toward the classroom.

Amane remembered Hibiya's knowing yet hesitant tone yesterday. He figured she must have already known about Konishi's feelings for him. They were close friends, so it wouldn't be surprising if they had shared a conversation or two about it. If that were the case, Hibiya would surely have a grudge against him for how things turned out, but there was nothing. She didn't demand an explanation or scold him. She watched silently without a trace of accusation in her expression.

Their silence made Amane feel even guiltier. They passed him by as if nothing had happened. No tension, no awkwardness.

Amane pressed his lips together for a moment, then folded his coat and tucked it away in his locker.

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Amane, Itsuki, and Yuuta were having lunch together in the classroom. They each had their own homemade bento.

As much as he appreciated Mahiru's lunches, Amane could cook for himself just fine. He couldn't bring himself to rely on her every single time. So today, he'd made his own.

Mahiru had wanted to make one for him like she always had, but Amane felt it would be far too selfish to have her make lunch for him after her elaborate Valentine's Day dinner.

As for Mahiru, she had gone to the cafeteria with Chitose and Ayaka.

Amane had also made her bento (though it did include some of the side dishes she had prepared in advance), which she was likely eating now.

Still, he felt the girls would talk about how Valentine's Day had gone or how well he had managed to make her lunch. Just thinking about it made his stomach ache a little.

"Man, look at all the new couples," Itsuki remarked thoughtfully as he peeled back the plastic wrap from a store-bought rice ball. He was too lazy to cook something himself.

Sure enough, Amane noticed many classmates had grown noticeably closer after Valentine's Day. Even a quick glance into the hallway revealed far more couples walking together than before. Even someone as dense as him couldn't miss the sweet, almost giddy atmosphere around him. Valentine's Day truly had a remarkable way of bringing people together.

"Valentine's *was* just yesterday. I'll bet there were plenty of ups and downs going on in places we can't see. It's just easier to notice the change in those for whom things worked out, that's all," Yuuta mused.

"…You're not interested in that kind of stuff, Kadowaki?" Amane asked.

"I've got my hands full with track right now, and honestly, I don't really feel like I want anything like that at the moment. We've got entrance exams coming up too, so I just don't have the time for it."

MILK

The ever-disciplined Yuuta shook his head.

Among the three of them and even the entire school, Yuuta was the most popular guy by far. And yet, romance wasn't on his mind right now.

If the shell-shocked boys who were practically shedding tears of blood over his popularity—or the girls who had feelings for him—happened to overhear that, a chorus of distressed cries would no doubt echo through the classroom. But since they kept their voices low, the rest of the class remained blissfully unaware, too absorbed in their lunches to notice.

"I'm flattered people have feelings for me, but I feel bad that I can't return them. I have to turn them down, and the guilt sticks with me."

Amane had only rejected someone once, and it had already taken a toll on him. Meanwhile, Yuuta had been through this process more times than he could possibly count. Just how strong must he have become to stay composed, never letting those around him notice his stress?

If Amane felt guilty after experiencing it just once, then Yuuta must be dealing with a feeling far more crushing.

"You really have it rough all the time, Kadowaki," Amane said.

"Yeah, I mean, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't tough…but at this point, it's just a part of life."

"So you've gone numb to it."

"I know saying I've gotten used to it might not sit well with some, but…it's true, I've gotten used to being confessed to. It's been like this since I was a kid."

"Yeah, you've never *not* been popular…" Having lived in the same school district since they were kids, Itsuki recalled Yuuta's past and grimaced. "It was even worse back then. Kids can't control their emotions, so things got messy fast."

Yeah…that must've been awful.

Amane felt queasy just imagining it.

"I've turned down so many confessions that some girls confess expecting me to reject them. I usually tell them half sincerely and half as a formality that I want to focus on my club activities, and they accept that

reason."

"Half sincerely?"

"…Honestly, man, when that many people like you, it stops feeling flattering and becomes overwhelming. It's just…a lot."

"Ahh…"

Amane couldn't relate, but he still found the prospect intimidating. It must have been far worse for Yuuta, who was actually experiencing it.

Things have improved somewhat lately, but in the past, it was normal for him to be swamped at school events. Yuuta must have been exhausted from having so many people around him at all times. On top of that, he had to be mindful not to lead on those who had feelings for him.

Given all that, Amane could hardly blame him for venting his frustrations.

"When someone comes on too strong, I instinctively become cautious… I have to. If I show any kind of weakness, there's always a risk they'll twist it in their favor and spread weird rumors about me."

"That from personal experience?" Amane asked.

"Yeah, that actually happened back in middle school."

"Stop. Don't remind me, Itsuki."

Yuuta physically shuddered and set down his chopsticks.

Amane couldn't help but sympathize with him.

"One more thing…when you get used to people liking you, it's easy to start taking that for granted. I worry that one day, I might turn into some arrogant idiot who thinks he's special. So, I constantly second-guess myself to make sure I don't get too full of it."

"You've got a lot on your plate… You have to stay cautious so you don't get tripped up, but at the same time, you have to be careful so you don't end up isolated."

"Thankfully, I have many kind friends. Nothing like that has happened yet. But I always have to stay mindful of how I carry myself and where I stand."

Yuuta always held a gentle and considerate smile. But beneath it, he felt weary from being mindful of the people around him.

No matter how talented, caring, or good-looking someone was, there

would always be people who disliked them. And if given the chance, some would even try to bring them down. Amane understood this all too well after watching Mahiru navigate the same struggles.

The fact that both Yuuta and Mahiru never let their battles show made their composure all the more impressive.

"For now, I think everyone knows that I won't date anyone. I'm so busy with club activities that I honestly don't have the time for it."

"As expected from the club's captain and ace. You're dedicated."

"Haha, I'm not all that impressive."

Yuuta might be humble about it, but he managed something Amane could never hope to imitate.

As the club captain, he supervised the team while pushing himself to improve. He consistently delivered top-tier results in competitions without neglecting his academics. He was the very definition of an ideal honor student who excelled in both sports and studies.

Amane had no interest in competitive sports, so he couldn't fully gauge just how impressive Yuuta's achievements were. But he did know that Yuuta had been featured in the school newspaper multiple times.

"…Hey, so just to confirm…you're not planning to date anyone right now, right? At all," Amane asked.

"Yeah, I'm not."

Yuuta nodded right away, but Amane hadn't finished.

"So…" he continued, voicing his concern, "won't they all come flooding in once you retire from club activities this summer?"

Yuuta had been rejecting girls with a polite excuse that left no hard feelings: *"I want to focus on my club activities."* But looking at it another way, wasn't he leaving the door open for next year? Once he retired from the club, what was stopping those who had been waiting in the wings from making another move?

Yuuta was a genuinely kind person, but his soft approach to rejecting people might come back to bite him. Even the faintest sliver of hope could be enough for some to reach out again in hopes of reeling him in.

Yuuta's eyes darted nervously when he realized what Amane was getting at. He was already imagining the inevitable.

Seeing his reaction, Itsuki sighed, equally exasperated and sympathetic.

"You're too soft, man."

"Yeah, seriously…" Amane added. "What's your game plan here?"

"U-uh…well, I still won't date anyone. I think. At least for now, that's what I've decided."

As expected, Yuuta wouldn't budge. He spoke with firm conviction, even as his smile tensed.

"I can already picture the chaos."

"That's the one thing I won't compromise on. If I ever date someone, I want our love to be mutual. I can't just agree to a confession on a whim. It'd be disrespectful to pick from a list of confessors. I want to find my partner myself."

"Yeah… Sounds like something you'd say, Yuuta."

"And besides, let's say I do end up liking someone. There's a chance people might direct their resentment toward them… Because of that, I can't even let my feelings show," Yuuta murmured with a small, lonely smile.

Amane understood exactly what he meant. In his case, he'd been on the receiving end of it.

When Mahiru, a super popular girl, openly confessed that he was someone important to her, plenty of students took issue with it. After they officially started dating, he had to deal with random strangers meddling, snide remarks, and even outright verbal attacks.

Amane had seen it coming and didn't let it bother him. But Mahiru, on the other hand, had taken it to heart, and there were times when it really got to her. Eventually, whether for better or worse, she grew accustomed to it. She ultimately found her own way to deal with it: brushing the comments off with a graceful smile and applying pressure to keep them in check.

By standing firm together and handling things confidently, they gradually earned recognition. Now, people have given up and accepted that their relationship is there to stay.

"People can be scary. Individually, they might seem like ordinary, reasonable people. But when they band together, that can change. Someone who otherwise wouldn't, might become a bully just because everyone else

was doing the same. If that ever happened, and the person I love got hurt because of it… I wouldn't be able to forgive myself. You get what I mean. Right, Itsuki?"

"…Yeah. I do."

Itsuki nodded with a sour look on his face. He had a similar experience of his own in the past.

"I don't want my partner to get bullied because of me… So, I doubt I'd pursue a relationship until I know I have everything under control."

"You deserve to be happy too, Yuuta."

"I'm happy you think so. I'll do my best in my own way."

"Pretty sure you aren't the problem."

"But the only thing I can change is *me*. There's nothing else I can do. Moments like these make me wish I had the power to handle things better."

"Do you seek…power…?"

"I do, but can you provide it, Itsuki?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Bro, at least give me a 'I shall bestow it upon thee!'"

Yuuta laughed, showing no sign of being discouraged.

Relieved, Amane joined in and quipped, "Don't make promises you can't keep," chuckling to lighten the slightly somber mood.

Chapter 3

Love Takes Many Forms

"Tell me, young one… Didst thou enjoy a splendid Valentine's Day?"

When Amane entered the café, Miyamoto greeted him with that question and a teasing grin.

Since Amane hadn't taken a shift on Valentine's Day, he had worked the day after to make up for it. He had more or less expected to be teased about it, so he managed to keep his expression from twitching.

Most of his coworkers who had partners had taken the day off, and the café managed to stay afloat thanks to Miyamoto covering their shifts. Amane was certainly grateful for that, but he didn't feel the same way about the teasing.

"What kind of character are you supposed to be? You're still plenty young, Miyamoto-san."

"I can't compete with a high schooler's fresh youth anymore."

"What do you mean…? You're barely in your twenties."

As Amane checked the order screen to ensure nothing had come in, he murmured, "Well, I'd say I had a pretty satisfying Valentine's Day."

He caught a glimpse of Miyamoto's relieved expression out of the corner of his eye.

The store wasn't too crowded today, so they had a little room to chat. Yesterday had been a different story—Valentine's Day had the place packed.

Just before Amane's shift started, Minase, who had just clocked out, had sighed in the locker room, muttering, "Yesterday was *brutal*," while shooting him a slightly resentful look.

"Glad to hear. Valentine's Day drama's not exactly rare…"

"I can tell just from watching my friends, but…judging by how you said

that, is this from personal experience?"

Miyamoto sounded somewhat melancholic, as if he'd experienced it before.

What exactly happened…?

As Amane looked at Miyamoto, who looked even more dejected now, Oohashi returned after seeing off a customer. She gave an exaggerated shrug.

"Even Daichi's pretty popular with the girls, believe it or not. *Even Daichi*," Oohashi remarked, deliberately emphasizing the last part.

Her phrasing was somewhat harsh, but if Oohashi said it, it was probably true—she'd known Miyamoto for years.

Miyamoto scowled and shot her an annoyed glare, but Oohashi stayed completely unfazed, acting like she hadn't said a word.

"What do you mean, *even me*?"

"You've got a nice face, but your personality? Yeah, not so great. You're so disrespectful."

"I don't recall ever being disrespectful to anyone but you."

"Wow. You're the worst."

“The real issue here is that *you* always disrespect *me* first,” Miyamoto claimed.

“I do *not*. How rude! Right, Fujimiya-chan?”

“…No comment.”

“Why not!?”

In reality, they were just snapping at each other. They were more venting than arguing, so neither was really at fault. But if Amane pointed that out, it was obvious it would only make things worse.

Amane liked both Miyamoto and Oohashi as his seniors, but there was no way he was about to get involved in what would almost certainly turn into a lovers’ quarrel. If anything, he wanted to tell them to leave him out of it. Not that he could, mind you.

Amane sealed his lips shut like a clam, determined to stay silent and avoid getting caught in the crossfire. For some reason, Miyamoto took his silence as a sign of agreement and flashed a triumphant grin, looking oddly satisfied.

“See? Even our kouhai thinks so.”

“Miyamoto-san, please don’t twist my reaction to prove your point. I have nothing to say to either of you. Also, you’re getting a bit rowdy, so please keep it down.”

They had been bickering in hushed voices, but the customers would start to overhear if they got any louder. Raising a finger to his lips, Amane let out a quiet *shh*.

That simple gesture instantly silenced them. Grateful they still had enough sense to keep things in check, Amane shifted his gaze toward the employee corridor.

“I understand that you two are comfortable enough with each other not to hold back, but for now, please *do* hold back. If you really must continue, kindly take it to the break room and go all out there. Though, I won’t be responsible if the owner happens to be watching from the shadows.”

“All right, all right, I get it. Sorry, that one’s on us. We’ll behave.”

The thought of bickering—playfully or not—under Fumika’s watchful

gaze was too much for Miyamoto. He was the first to apologize.

Amane smiled. *So he wasn't actually mad in the first place, huh?*

Oohashi also stopped arguing. She slumped her shoulders and let out a halfhearted "Sorryyy!"

Amane shrugged, relieved that the situation had settled.

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"By the way, Miyamoto-san, what did you get from Oohashi-san?"

As closing time neared and Amane wrapped up his tasks, he pushed open the locker room door, ready to change and head home. But just then, a thought struck him, and he decided to ask Miyamoto about it.

Just earlier, on his way to the locker room, Oohashi had handed Amane a belated Valentine's chocolate. His heart nearly stopped for a second—she'd given it to him right in front of Miyamoto.

But the moment he saw what it was, he let out a quiet sigh of relief. It was a longtime best-seller: a cheap chocolate bar that barely cost thirty yen. Oohashi had grinned, *"I'm broke right now, sorry!"*

Yesterday, both Miyamoto and Oohashi had been on shift. When Miyamoto grumbled that it wasn't fair for her to give Amane chocolate, Oohashi immediately said, *"I gave you yours yesterday, didn't I?"*—which confirmed that Miyamoto had gotten some, too.

What sparked Amane's curiosity now was Miyamoto. Sure, he'd teased Amane earlier, but how had *his* Valentine's Day gone?

Amane casually asked Miyamoto as he tucked the chocolate into his bag.

"Damn, you just had to bring that up…" Miyamoto muttered, sharp but not irritated. If anything, he looked a little awkward or reluctant to answer.

"She *tossed* individually wrapped Black Thunders at me."

"That's not so bad, right?" Amane replied. "They're tasty and a little fancy, even."

"Yeah, but who the hell pelts someone with them?"

Miyamoto looked thoroughly unamused, but it was all too easy to imagine Oohashi casually tossing the chocolates his way. The mental image

made Amane chuckle—only to be met with a sharp glare from Miyamoto.

"You're laughing like it's none of your business."

"But you don't hate them, right?"

"I hate how I got hit in the face."

"And what about the chocolates?"

"…No comment."

"Uh-huh."

Amane had brushed things off the same way at the start of his shift, so he wasn't in any position to press Miyamoto now. And if Miyamoto didn't want to admit anything, that was fine. Amane wasn't tactless enough to dig any deeper.

Amane nodded and casually folded up his apron.

"You ain't cute at all."

"That's nothing new."

Amane chuckled, wondering how Miyamoto had ever thought he was cute in the first place. In response, Miyamoto clicked his tongue loud enough to hear, making Amane laugh harder.

For all his grumbling, Miyamoto's reaction made it evident that he was actually happy to get chocolate from Oohashi.

Still amused, Amane slipped on his blazer. Miyamoto muttered under his breath as he yanked off his tie and tossed it into his locker without much care. But there was no real frustration behind it.

I guess now's as good a time as any… Amane thought, turning back to Miyamoto.

"I'd like to ask you something, Miyamoto-san."

There was something Amane wanted to hear from him today.

"Why'd you get all serious?"

Noticing that Amane's expression was more serious than usual, Miyamoto straightened his clothes and turned to face him properly.

"From what Oohashi-san said, it sounds like you're pretty popular with women," Amane began.

"What, you can't tell just by looking at me?"

"No, I figured as much. As long as you don't act the way you do with Oohashi-san in front of everyone else, you come off as a dependable,

easygoing guy."

"That supposed to be a compliment?"

"Yes, but I wasn't complimenting how you treat Oohashi-san."

"Whatever."

This guy's never honest when it comes to Oohashi-san, huh…

The thought crossed Amane's mind again as he watched Miyamoto eye him warily, clearly sensing that this wasn't the real reason behind the question. Amane chuckled.

"So? What's this about?"

"...Well, before we go any further, I just want to confirm something first. Is that okay?"

"Confirm what?"

"The whole…*Miyamoto-san has a thing for Oohashi-san* talk."

For the second time today, Miyamoto clicked his tongue at him. But Amane didn't back down.

"Could you not do that? I get that this probably isn't something you want to discuss."

"…So?"

"If it's hard to answer, you don't have to. But…" Amane paused, then pressed on. "Uh, when someone confessed their feelings to you…how did you respond?"

Yuuta probably had the most experience out of everyone Amane knew if it were just about turning people down. But if he could help it, Amane didn't want to ask Yuuta—or even Itsuki—for this sort of advice.

Miyamoto might speak bluntly and act like he didn't care, but according to something Souji had let slip, he'd been carrying feelings for Oohashi for a long time. In that sense, his situation felt the closest to Amane's. That was why Amane wanted to hear it from him.

Miyamoto didn't brush off or make a joke of Amane's sudden question. He blinked a few times, then let out a slow, quiet breath.

"I just said 'sorry' and turned them down normally… Wait, did you seriously think I was the type to date someone I don't even like?"

"Not at all. It's just…well, even I can tell you must be popular. I figured this must've happened to you a lot, and I wondered if it ever weighed in on

you."

"…So, what, Fujimiya? You got confessed to, turned her down, and now you feel guilty about it?"

Miyamoto had picked up on what Amane was really getting at. He watched Amane tense up with a bitter smile. The silence that followed was all the confirmation he needed.

"You're way too serious for your own good, dude," Miyamoto muttered, his brows drawing down slightly. But there was no teasing in his voice.

"Well, I guess that's one of your good points. Still, I gotta say, I'm more surprised this hasn't happened to you until now."

"Well, that's because… before I met my girlfriend, I was just this gloomy guy who didn't want to deal with people. Stuff like being liked or anything like that never even crossed my mind. But even after I changed and started dating her, everyone around us seemed to know I was completely devoted to her… I guess it showed, so nobody really tried to come between us."

"Really!? Man, I'd love to see you acting all lovey-dovey."

"I-I *really* don't want you to see that…"

"So, from what I gather…someone confessed to you even though they knew you were taken. You turned them down, but it's still bothering you."

"…Yeah, that's about right."

"Well, it was obvious you'd turn them down, so it's not like there was anything else you could've done."

"True. Accepting wasn't even an option. That would've been a betrayal to my girlfriend, and honestly…my heart's completely hers. No matter what happened, I was never going to say yes."

That would never change, no matter who asked or when.

Everyone knew that Amane would never choose anyone but Mahiru. His feelings for her had grown so deep, so certain, that he could say it without hesitation. Even if someone cried in front of him, it wouldn't change a thing. He would never choose anyone else.

Still, he couldn't help feeling guilty for hurting someone by rejecting them. That guilt was simply the natural consequence of his own decision. He had never considered accepting the confession—but he'd prepared himself for the pain that came with saying no.

Unable to put that weight into words, Amane had turned to Miyamoto, hoping to hear from someone who'd been through it before.

Miyamoto narrowed his eyes slightly and let out a quiet breath. "Then that's where you should stop thinking about it. Feeling guilty in the moment is natural, but you can't let it haunt you forever."

His words were smooth yet carried an edge sharp enough to slice through the air.

"I've seen my fair share of relationships unfold around me," Miyamoto began. "And from what I've seen, the kind of girl who'd fall for someone like you, Fujimiya…is probably the quiet, perceptive type. Someone who notices the little things. A girl looking for something *real*, not something casual." He gave a casual shrug. "That's just my take. Sound about right?"

"…Yeah, it does," Amane admitted.

"That kind of girl…" Miyamoto went on, "and this is just my guess—but don't you think she'd end up blaming herself if she knew you were feeling guilty? Just like how you feel bad for turning her down, she'd probably think, *It's my fault for confessing to him in the first place*."

"That's…"

"You had no intention of accepting, and that's not going to change. But if you keep dwelling on it, you're not just being unfair to that girl—you're being unfair to your girlfriend, too."

"…Yeah. You're right."

"Not to be harsh," Miyamoto said plainly, "but if the guy who turned her down keeps holding on to it, the girl can't move on. She confessed to find closure. And if you don't let it go, your so-called 'kindness' might just turn into selfishness." He paused for a second before finishing, "Depending on the situation, kindness can be as sharp as a blade."

True to his words, Miyamoto's brand of kindness cut through the murk clouding Amane's heart like a sharpened edge. Amane understood it wasn't meant to hurt him but to carve out the hesitation weighing him down.

It was a different kind of kindness than his own. One that didn't hurt others without realizing it.

Amane bit down on his lip, the faint taste of iron spreading across his tongue. But compared to the pain he'd unknowingly caused to the girl he

rejected, this was nothing. He swallowed it down without complaint.

"…I'm not telling you to beat yourself up over it. I'm just saying, take a step back and reflect a little. You're way too hard on yourself, you know that?"

"I just realized I ended up hurting them twice over, that's all."

"*Ugh*! That's exactly what I mean!"

Miyamoto ran a hand through his neatly styled hair, messing it up without a second thought, and let out an exaggerated, heavy sigh.

"In love, when things go smoothly, that's the exception—not the rule. You've gotta accept that sometimes, it just doesn't work out. One person's happiness comes at the cost of someone else's pain, and at some point, you've got to make peace with that. Live long enough, and you'll realize life never plays out exactly how you want it to."

"…You seem pretty good at compartmentalizing this kind of thing, Miyamoto-san."

"In my case, I'm not as kind as you, Fujimiya. And honestly, I don't care that much about other people to begin with. I can't afford to get that invested. If I'm not planning to take responsibility for someone else's life, there's no point in dwelling on it after turning them down. I don't want to give them any false hope. At the end of the day, they're just another person living their own life. You've got to find a way to make peace with that."

Miyamoto's ability to switch gears was something Amane lacked. And something he knew he should probably learn from.

Amane wasn't some idealist. He didn't believe in kindness for kindness' sake. He valued the people closest to him above casual acquaintances, and he understood the difference.

But when he was stretched thin—when he was stuck between a rock and a hard place—drawing a cold line between his loved ones and everyone else wasn't easy… He hesitated to push people outside the bounds of his care, to write them off as just another person with no real tie to him. That kind of distinction never came naturally.

But now, he understood. His half-hearted kindness—his reluctance to set boundaries—could end up hurting others instead.

That much was clear to him now.

Of course, understanding it didn't mean he could change right away. Amane wasn't that decisive.

Even so, dwelling on it won't do either of us any good. Amane reminded himself of that truth and gave a resolute nod.

"Also, I guess I had to get used to letting things go. I mean, she's always jumping from one guy to the next, so there's no point in sweating over every little thing."

Miyamoto grumbled the words like an afterthought.

Amane blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes at him.

Miyamoto, clearly uncomfortable, averted his gaze. "As long as I'm the one with her in the end, that's all that matters."

"Now *that's* true love."

"Shut up."

Miyamoto had probably spent years quietly watching over Oohashi in his own way, swallowing down more than his share of bitter pills. And still, he held on—never once letting go of his feelings.

That unwavering devotion was dazzling in its own right, and Amane found himself smiling softly.

Chapter 4

Young'uns Worried About Their Return Gifts

Now that Valentine's Day had passed, the next challenge on the horizon was the end-of-year exams at the end of the month.

The lighthearted mood from just days ago had given way to a more stifling atmosphere as students buckled down to prepare for the culmination of their year-long effort.

Amane's relationship with Konishi remained unchanged. He made a conscious effort to treat her just as he always had, and whether she noticed or not, she acted as though nothing had happened. Thanks to that, no one around them seemed to suspect a thing.

The way she looked at him had changed, too. There was no longer any trace of pain in her eyes—only calmness. At least to Amane, it felt like she was slowly moving forward. And he was, too. Little by little, he was learning to parse the guilt, letting it settle gently into the past where it belonged.

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"Fujimiya, got a sec?"

"Hm?"

Since Amane had the day off from work due to exams, he had planned to swing by the bookstore after school to pick up some reference books and a few extra notebooks. Because of that, he and Mahiru had gone their separate ways for the afternoon.

But just as he was about to leave the classroom, a classmate suddenly

called out to him.

It was the kind of thing the old Amane never would've expected. But ever since he'd started dating Mahiru, he'd started chatting more and more with his classmates.

Still, he wasn't especially close to this particular one. They'd exchange a few words now and then when the moment called for it, but neither of them ever made an effort to go beyond that. That was the extent of their relationship.

So if the guy was going out of his way to talk to him now, he must've had a reason.

Does he need something?

Amane felt a little confused, but what really caught his attention was the desperate look in his classmate's eyes. It was like he was clinging to him for help.

"Tachikawa, do you need something?"

"Well, uh…could you let me copy your notes from last week's class?"

Of all the things Amane might've expected, the request turned out to be perfectly ordinary.

He always kept his notes neat and well-organized—not just for his own use, but in a way that would be easy for others to read if they ever needed to borrow them. So there was no real reason to refuse.

Still, Amane had always seen Tachikawa as a relatively diligent student, so it came as a bit of a surprise that he hadn't taken notes himself.

Noticing the unspoken question in Amane's eyes, Tachikawa gave a sheepish smile.

"It's just that one class. I had the flu, remember? I asked a few other people, but none of them had decent notes."

"Ah, right. You were off that day," Amane said, nodding. "I don't mind, but…why ask me?"

"Well, you're the easiest to ask out of the people here right now, and I figured you actually take proper notes. Plus, you're pretty smart."

Looking around, Amane noted that the classroom was mostly empty—just himself, Itsuki, a few girls, and Tachikawa's usual group. Mahiru was off studying one-on-one with Chitose, which was why they'd gone their

separate ways after school.

Given the circumstances, it made sense that Tachikawa would turn to another guy rather than approach one of the girls. He wasn't the type to casually strike up conversations with them, so his options were essentially Amane or Itsuki.

The deciding factor was probably academics. If it were just about being approachable, Itsuki would've been the obvious choice. But when it came to reliable, test-worthy notes, Amane was the safer bet. He could understand why Tachikawa had come to him.

"I appreciate the compliment, but are you sure you want my notes?"

"You're the best option, Fujimiya. You're always helping Shirakawa out, and I figured you'd actually write down the stuff that'll be on the test. Even if Shiina-san were here, I wouldn't ask her… it'd just feel wrong, y'know? And I wouldn't wanna put you in an awkward spot either…"

Amane wasn't the type to get jealous over something like that. If Mahiru was fine with it, then so was he. But since she wasn't around, there was no need to bring her into the conversation. If Tachikawa genuinely preferred his notes, Amane had no reason to refuse.

"I'll make it up to you, so please!"

"You don't have to do anything in return…but here, go ahead."

Tachikawa's desperation was understandable, given the looming exams and the little time left to prepare.

Not wanting to keep him waiting, Amane pulled his binder from his bag and handed it over as is.

Tachikawa's face immediately lit up in relief. "I owe you one! I'll go make a copy right now!"

"Knock yourself out."

Wasting no time, Tachikawa clutched the binder and bolted out of the classroom at full speed.

Amane couldn't help but chuckle at his enthusiasm.

Just then, Itsuki—now packed up and ready to go—strolled over casually.

"What's up?"

"Tachikawa asked to copy my notes, so I lent them to him. He's probably

down at the photocopier; he'll be back soon."

"Ah, makes sense. I get why he chose you. You're surprisingly meticulous about stuff like that."

"You make it sound like I'm sloppy at everything else."

"Well, your room *was* a war zone before you got close to Shiina-san."

"…That's a different matter entirely."

"Sure, sure."

Now, it was something he couldn't and didn't even *want* to imagine, but back when he first met Mahiru, Amane's room had been an absolute mess. He had enough sense to throw away food waste, so it wasn't filthy to the point of attracting bugs. But…the clutter was so bad you had to watch your step just to walk through it.

Truthfully, Itsuki had probably seen the full extent of the disaster more than even Mahiru had. If *he* was calling out how messy it was, there was really nothing Amane could say in his defense. He used to half-heartedly shove things out of sight whenever Itsuki came over, but even that effort hadn't done much to hide the chaos. The fact that Itsuki still called it a *"war zone"* despite that left Amane with no room to argue.

…I keep it nice and clean now.

Ever since Mahiru had drilled tidiness into him, Amane's place had stayed organized. He'd made a habit of cleaning up after himself, and Mahiru no longer had to remind him about the basics.

"Well, your notes are pretty neat, and you summarize things efficiently without all the fluff. People know they're easy to read."

"I appreciate the compliment, but…why do people *know* that?"

"They've seen you showing your notes to Chi plenty of times. And Shiina-san praises them too, right? So people just kinda assume they're good."

"…I guess that's fine. Speaking of Chitose, how's her studying going? End-of-year exams are coming up fast. The scope's huge—it covers the entire year."

"She's been screaming non-stop about it."

"Yeah, figured."

After Itsuki's runaway incident over New Year's, both he and Chitose

had gone through a bit of a shift in mindset. Lately, they'd been taking their studies more seriously. Still, their understanding of earlier material wasn't exactly strong. It made sense—trying to properly learn things they'd mostly ignored until now was no small task. With so much ground to cover, it wasn't going to be easy.

If deciding to study was all it took to magically remember everything, no one would ever struggle. That said, Itsuki had always been good at figuring out the minimum effort he needed to get by, so he wasn't having nearly as rough a time as Chitose.

"Well, today she's having an intense one-on-one study session with Shiina-san."

"Yeah, she mentioned that. That's why we're heading home separately today… Mahiru's even stricter when no one else is around, so I hope that'll help Chitose lock in."

"Hmm, I've got a feeling I'll get some whiny messages soon."

Chitose wasn't the type to try and escape, but she definitely wasn't above complaining. Normally, she'd run to Mahiru for sympathy—but with Mahiru being the one putting her through the wringer this time, her boyfriend would probably be the next best option.

"You don't have work today, right, Amane?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did. I was gonna stop by the bookstore on the way home."

On days when he wasn't working, Amane usually went home with Mahiru, either to study or take care of leftover chores. But that didn't mean they were always glued together. They both had their own friends and personal errands, and they made a point not to restrict each other's time.

Since Mahiru was tied up with Chitose today, Amane figured it was the perfect opportunity to check off a few things he'd been meaning to take care of.

"Then let me tag along. I need to pick up some books for next year's material anyway."

"Sure, why not… I see you've gotten serious now, huh?"

"Guess so. I can't keep running from it forever. I made up my mind."

"That's good to hear."

Ever since New Year's, Itsuki's determination had been something to admire. His renewed focus on studying had even started to inspire their classmates, and thanks in part to that, their already diligent class had gained an even better reputation among the teachers. It was proof that life could take surprising turns in unexpected ways.

"Heyy, Fujimiya! You saved me!"

Before they realized it, Tachikawa had returned, having finished copying the notes at lightning speed. Grinning brightly, he handed the binder back to Amane.

"And, uh…sorry!"

"…What are you apologizing for?"

"Well, I ended up copying more pages than I said I would…so, uh, my bad."

"Oh, that's all? Don't sweat it."

Since Tachikawa had paid for the copies himself, it wasn't like Amane had lost anything. A quick flip through the binder showed everything was intact—no damage, no missing pages.

If anything, Amane found his honesty kind of endearing. He could've easily kept quiet and Amane would've been none the wiser, but instead he'd gone out of his way to admit it and apologize. It spoke volumes to his character.

"Seriously, thanks a ton. I'll definitely repay this debt…!"

"Nah, don't worry about it. It's not like I went out of my way or anything."

"Still, I feel like I should…"

"It's fine, really. Oh, by the way, the stuff I wrote in red in the margins are what the teacher said would be on the test. You should focus on those when you review. Apparently, they showed up on the past two years' exams too."

"Lifesaver!"

"Wait, lemme see too!" Itsuki asked.

"You already pay attention in class."

"I wanna compare it to my own notes!"

"…Fine, fine. Here."

“Why are you so strict with me but so nice to Tachikawa!? This is unfair!”

“I’m not gonna turn down someone who missed class for a legit reason and asked politely.”

Naturally, there was a difference between someone who’d missed class for unavoidable reasons and someone asking just out of curiosity.

Itsuki dramatically pretended to cry, while Tachikawa burst out laughing at the scene. Watching the two of them fool around, Amane couldn’t help but smile too.

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“…People move fast, huh? Valentine’s Day just ended, and now they’ve already got White Day stuff out.”

After parting ways with Tachikawa, Amane headed to the shopping mall with Itsuki, where the bookstore was located. Since his last visit, the decorations had completely changed. Though the overall vibe stayed the same, the promotional signs had all been swapped out for White Day.

The event space still had its display cases up, but the chocolate-centered selections had been replaced with a wider assortment of sweets. Compared to the dramatic transformation from Christmas to New Year’s, this change felt more like a casual reshuffle than a full rebrand.

After picking out and purchasing their books, Amane and Itsuki wandered around the mall for a bit. Many of the food-related stores had already started advertising for White Day.

“They could’ve acknowledged Hinamatsuri, at least…”

“Nowadays, capitalism takes priority over traditional events.”

“Businesses do profit more when there’s money flying around. I guess we should be grateful in a way—we get to enjoy good food because of it.”

“…Says a guy who got chocolates.”

“Hey, some people *do* buy them for themselves, you know…”

Being teased about it put Amane in an awkward spot. These days, Valentine’s wasn’t just about romance—it had evolved into a full-on

chocolate festival, with high-end brands setting up booths in event spaces. More and more people looked forward to it each year.

Most knew it was all part of a marketing strategy, but that didn't stop them from enjoying it. Amane had no reason to complain either, especially since he'd benefited from the trend himself. In fact, last year's White Day promos had helped him out a lot. That alone was reason enough to keep quiet.

"White Day, huh…"

It was the day for guys to return the favor—to show appreciation for the gifts received on Valentine's.

"This is Yuuta's hell on earth."

"Bet it burns a hole in his wallet."

"Oh, definitely. But you've gotta hand it to him. He still makes sure to return every single gift."

Plenty of classmates envied Yuuta's popularity, but Amane couldn't understand the appeal.

Sure, from the outside, being popular might look like a dream. But in reality, it was nothing but trouble. Sooner or later, there'd be jealousy, drama, or misunderstandings. And if he ever handled it poorly, the consequences would fall squarely on him. A single misstep could lead to being ostracized.

After hearing Yuuta's stories firsthand, Amane was convinced it wasn't a situation he ever wanted to be in.

With the sheer number of chocolates Yuuta had received, just carrying them home had been a challenge—let alone actually eating them. Amane had witnessed the chaos firsthand, and even Itsuki had pitched in to help.

And that was just the beginning. Yuuta still had to eat them all. Knowing his personality, tossing any out wasn't an option. If he was going to get through them, he'd need to manage his calorie intake and nutrition with careful precision. On top of that, he had to remember who gave him what and prepare a proper return gift for every single person.

Considering all of that, Amane could say with absolute confidence that he never wanted to be in Yuuta's shoes.

"He's super committed to returning all the gifts. It's seriously

impressive," Amane said, genuinely awe-struck.

"He's been like that since middle school," Itsuki replied. "When it comes to stuff like this, he never skimps out."

"…Come to think of it, what about the school rules? Did they try to put a stop to it?"

"They turned a blind eye to Valentine's and White Day," Itsuki said. "The student pressure was unreal. I heard they tried cracking down once, but it caused a huge uproar. Total backfire."

"That's what happens when people band together."

"Girl power's no joke. So, what about you, Amane? Got any plans for White Day?"

"Yeah…that's the thing. Choosing a White Day gift is hard. It's basically a test of your taste and how well you've been paying attention."

And Amane was no exception. Unlike Yuuta, most of the chocolates he received were clearly out of courtesy, which made the returns relatively straightforward.

But the real challenge was *Mahiru*.

Last year, after a long conversation with a store clerk, he'd settled on a bracelet and a set of three *"I'll do anything you say"* coupons. But things were different then—they hadn't started dating yet, and he hadn't even fully come to terms with his feelings for her.

This year was different. This time, the gift was for his girlfriend. He had a few ideas, sure, but actually settling on the right one was proving far more difficult than expected.

"Well, there's Shiina-san's, yeah," Itsuki said, "but you've got way more gifts to return this year."

"Everything besides Mahiru's is more or less just obligation chocolate."

"*More or less* obligation, huh?"

"…No comment."

"Well, I won't dig into your love life. You'll just get mad at me if I do."

Itsuki had a sharp sense for the things Amane truly didn't want to talk about and when to back off. That was something Amane genuinely appreciated about him. Of course, that also meant that when the topic wasn't sensitive, Itsuki had no problem charging in with the enthusiasm of

someone tap-dancing straight into someone else's business.

"If you know that, then maybe try applying that logic all the time."

"Nyah ha ha."

"Don't think you can laugh this off."

"Oh no, anyway—"

"Hey, don't just change the subject!"

Out of respect for Konishi's feelings, Amane hadn't told Itsuki about her confession. But knowing him, the scary part was how he probably had a good idea anyway.

"Well, I think the safest bet is to go with some nicely wrapped, slightly fancy sweets. I'm guessing you mostly got obligation chocolates, so something edible's the best move. I got some from the girls in our class too, so I'll return the favor with something that doesn't stick around."

"Yeah, something consumable with a decent shelf life is probably the safest route. Worst case, they can just toss it if they have to... By the way, is there anything Chitose specifically wants? For better or worse, she went all out, so I want to make sure I return the favor properly."

"Yeah, she definitely put tons of effort into it. Just not the regular kind…"

"Why does she only put her all into messing with me…?"

Amane honestly wanted to say she'd put effort into all the wrong places, but he knew Chitose had her reasons. Considering the fiasco from last year, anything outside of her so-called "jackpot" choices probably tasted genuinely good, which could be why Mahiru had given her approval.

That kind of mischief took more thought and preparation than your average homemade chocolate. So at the very least, Amane intended to return the favor with something that acknowledged the effort she'd put in.

"Uhh, I think it's a mix of finding your reactions hilarious, blowing off study stress, and…her personal hobby. Chi actually *likes* eating that stuff."

"I mean, I know most of it's good. *Mostly.* It's just that she always sneaks in a few imposter pieces that launch a full-scale assault on my taste buds. But yeah…I'll eat them all."

"Well, at least Shiina-san'll help cleanse your palate afterward."

"Shaddup. So, is there anything Chitose actually wants?"

"Motivation to study?"

“She can find that herself.”

Even though Chitose had been studying diligently since the start of the year, it was only natural for her motivation to waver now and then. But the fact that she kept pushing forward despite that was, without a doubt, something to admire.

“If she doesn’t want anything specific, I’ll just go with a set of baked goods from her favorite patisserie. She’ll need the sugar for studying anyway.”

“If Chi heard that, she’d probably start sobbing.”

“Because she doesn’t want to think about studying, right?”

“Ha ha ha. Yup. At least she’s trying her hardest.”

“I know… I can tell she’s making a real effort. You too, by the way.”

“Well, pretty much everyone is at this time of year.”

“Even so, you’re putting in the effort, and that’s something to be proud of.”

Once Itsuki committed to something, he always followed through. No matter how he felt about his father, he was determined to prove himself—to reach a place where they could speak on equal footing. Watching him work that hard, Amane couldn’t help but feel his own sense of resolve strengthen.

“Whoa, what’s with the sudden praise? You’re making me blush.” Itsuki smirked, then smoothly shifted the conversation. “So, what about Shiina-san? What’s your plan for her White Day gift?”

“Ah…yeah, about that.” Amane let out a soft sigh. “You’ve probably noticed from birthdays and Christmas, but Mahiru never says what she wants.”

“She doesn’t seem like the type to want much,” Itsuki agreed.

And he was right. It wasn’t that Mahiru lacked desire altogether—she just wasn’t particularly drawn to material things.

For Mahiru, things she *wanted* and things she *needed* were entirely separate. If something were necessary, she’d buy it without hesitation. But when it came to things she might want but didn’t *need*, her material desires were so faint that even she had trouble identifying what she truly wanted.

Which, for her boyfriend, made picking a gift a lot more complicated

than usual.

"Mahiru finds more joy in knowing I put thought into what might make her happy than in the actual gift itself. I mean, she still appreciates the present, but…the time and effort that went into choosing it is what matters most to her."

"I get what you mean. But honestly, isn't that exactly how *you* are when *she* gives you something? You're not exactly materialistic either."

"...Shut up."

"Like two peas in a pod."

Amane placed more value on things like good food, a clean home, and peaceful, quiet moments over material possessions. He wanted to preserve the everyday comfort he'd come to cherish.

Mahiru likely felt the same, so Amane couldn't exactly deny Itsuki's observation. Still, hearing it said in such a smug tone made his brow twitch, and he shot Itsuki a sharp glare.

As expected, it had zero effect.

With an exaggerated sigh, Amane gave him a light nudge with his elbow.

"So? Any ideas?" Itsuki asked.

"Well…not so much an idea as something I know would make her happy."

"I see, I see. Go on…"

"I think she'd love it if I invited her to the café I work at."

The one thing that came to mind right away was showing Mahiru his part-time job.

She'd been holding back because Amane had told her *"not yet,"* but it was obvious she was eager to go. She wanted to see it so badly, she'd even asked him to show her a picture of himself in his work uniform.

Is it really that interesting? he'd wondered at first. But then he thought—if their positions were reversed, and Mahiru were the one working somewhere, wouldn't *he* want to see her in action?

So while her excitement felt a little over the top, he couldn't exactly dismiss it.

She's still way too eager about it…

Mahiru always showed her emotions and affection so openly that

Amane couldn't help but feel a little pressured. Would he really live up to her expectations at work?

That uncertainty was part of why he'd asked her to wait until he felt more confident. But by now, she'd been waiting so long that she was probably starting to feel disappointed. Maybe it was finally time.

"Honestly, I'm more surprised it took you this long," Itsuki said, raising an eyebrow.

"I—I was busy! And I wasn't used to the job yet!" Amane defended himself. "...Also, it's just plain embarrassing. I mean, isn't seeing me in my work uniform or watching me deal with customers even more awkward than her seeing me with bedhead or making a weird face?"

"So she sees your bedhead all the time?"

"Oh, hush."

"You're not denying it, huh?"

"…Staying over isn't that big of a deal. Not in the way you're imagining, at least."

As Itsuki's grin grew even more obnoxious, Amane jabbed an elbow into his side again, lowering his voice in warning. They *had* stayed over together now and then—but nothing like what Itsuki was hinting at had ever happened. He and Mahiru had a shared understanding. More than that, they'd made a promise. Whether Itsuki actually believed him or not was another matter entirely.

This guy probably sees me as some spineless wimp who loves Mahiru too much to make a move…

But that wasn't it. *Not even close.*

If he were truly spineless, he wouldn't have even touched Mahiru. He wouldn't have gotten as intimate as he could with her while staying just within the bounds of their promise. Still, there was no way he would spell that out for Itsuki. Instead, Amane just shot him a cold, deadpan glare.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. You're so shy," Itsuki teased. "So, does this mean you're finally comfortable enough to let her watch you work?"

"Well, it's been four months now. I'm not perfect, but I've gotten good enough that I don't mind being watched… And, well, Mahiru's probably tired of waiting by now."

“Of course. If it’s about you, Shiina-san always bites. You’re one loved man.”

“I know. And I’m grateful for it.”

If anyone understood just how deeply Mahiru loved him, it was Amane himself. It wasn’t just in her words—it was in the way she looked at him, in her quiet gestures, in every small detail of how she treated him. Her care for him showed in everything she did.

And because she loved him, she always honored his pace. She never pushed, never forced anything beyond what he was ready for. That patience, that respect—it was something Amane would never take for granted. Mahiru had held back out of consideration for his feelings, and he wanted to return that same kindness.

If it would make her happy, then no matter how awkward or embarrassing it felt, he wanted to hold his head high and let her see him in action—working hard, giving it his all.

Saying it was “for Mahiru” felt like putting himself on too high a pedestal. But if it was for her smile, then Amane truly felt like he could do anything.

“You’ve finally learned how to accept things honestly. That’s the biggest change in you, Amane.”

“Well, *some people* kept scolding me for having no confidence.”

He’d been told over and over again that he was too pessimistic. Even his own parents had pointed it out at times. But the ones who had truly pushed him to change were the two most important people in his life.

His best friend—and the person he loved most.

They had kicked him forward when he hesitated, and pushed him ahead when he stalled.

Even now, Amane couldn’t say he’d completely shaken the habit of putting himself down. But little by little, through steady effort, he’d gained confidence. He could stand tall now, face forward, and see value in himself. Thinking back, his former self had been little more than a gloomy, self-deprecating loner. The fact that he could recognize that and see how far he’d come was proof of the change.

“I can think of at least three people who chewed you out for it.”

"…I appreciate the help."

"Oh, no need to thank me."

There had been some very forceful pushes along the way, but thanks to them, Amane had become who he was now. For that, he was nothing but grateful.

That said, he *had* been quite literally kicked in the rear before, so he silently vowed that if Itsuki ever got bogged down, *he'd* be the one doing the kicking next time.

Maybe I should've taken the chance back during New Year's… he thought. Then again, something told him that opportunity wouldn't come around again so easily.

"But yeah… Out of everything I came up with, that idea's the one that would make her happiest. Not sure if it really counts as a proper return gift, though."

"I think it works. If that's what you wanna do, then I'm pretty sure Shiina-san would see that as the best choice."

"…I hope so."

"Why are you suddenly unsure? You were so confident a second ago."

"I'm totally fine handling the work itself. I…just feel like Mahiru has *way* too high expectations for how I'll look in my uniform. I'm telling you, it's nothing special."

Amane was ready to let her see him doing his job, but he couldn't help feeling a little overwhelmed by how much she was looking forward to it.

At work, he wore a basic waiter's uniform: a crisp white dress shirt, a black vest, matching slacks, and a garçon-style apron. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it. It wasn't some fancy butler getup like the one he'd worn for the culture festival. And since Mahiru had already seen a photo of him in it, it wasn't like there'd be any surprises.

Will this be enough to satisfy her…?

"I dunno, man. If it's Shiina-san, I feel like she's gonna be thrilled."

"*Thrilled?* Seriously?"

"You know how she acts all composed at school, but when she's around people she's close with, she drops the act. And with you? She's downright giddy sometimes. So I wouldn't be surprised if seeing you in your work

uniform is, like, peak excitement for her. Also…there's a real chance Shiina-san has a thing for uniforms."

"Mahiru already has enough questionable hobbies as it is—don't go adding new ones."

"*Questionable hobbies…?*"

"For the sake of her dignity, I'm keeping that classified."

Lately, thanks to a certain muscle-obsessed girl (whose name shall go unspoken), Mahiru had taken more and more interest in Amane's physique.

Whether that girl deserved credit or blame, Amane hadn't quite decided.

Mahiru would touch and admire Amane's muscles with complete innocence, looking utterly delighted as she did. Since there was nothing improper about it, Amane couldn't really bring himself to scold her. He just let her do as she pleased. But if she also turned out to have a thing for uniforms on top of that… things might start getting complicated.

For his own sanity, he chose to believe she was just looking because she loved him and couldn't help being interested.

"Don't bring it up then, man… Besides, can't it just be that she has a *you* fetish? Is it really that big a deal?"

"M–moving on! We're done with this conversation!"

Talking about Mahiru like that felt wrong, especially when she wasn't around. Amane quickly waved his hand to change the topic before Itsuki could push it any further.

"Anyway, I've decided on that as my White Day gift, so don't mention it to Mahiru yet. I want to tell her myself."

"Come on, who do you take me for? I'm not dumb enough to do something that'd make you hold a lifelong grudge against me, especially after you flat-out asked me not to… Unless I said it was something else as a joke."

"So you *would* tell her."

"It wouldn't be a joke otherwise, would it? Oh, and dude, when are you inviting *me* to see you at work?"

"You're not invited."

"Wow, rude!"

"You literally don't let me visit your workplace either… Same thing."

Itsuki pouted at Amane's immediate rejection, but the truth was, he wasn't any more eager to let Amane see him at work. Even if Amane wouldn't make fun of him, the idea of being watched while working was just plain embarrassing. The only time Amane had ever stepped foot in Itsuki's workplace had been for Mahiru's birthday, and that had been a rare, special exception.

"Yes I have, for Shiina-san's birthday! It's totally unfair if I never get to see *you* working!"

Itsuki had a point. Even if it was just that one time, Amane had gone to see him in action. It would be unfair to shut him out in return. Amane didn't want to be the kind of person who made selfish, hypocritical demands.

Reluctantly, he muttered, "Fine. But only *after* Mahiru."

At that, Itsuki beamed and raised a hand in triumph. "'Kaaay!"

"That smug grin pisses me off."

"Hey, I've always wanted to see your customer service smile at least once."

"You already did at the culture festival…"

"Yeah, but you were totally stiff when I saw you. I'm after the real professional-mode *Amane-kun*."

"You're insufferable."

"Ho ho ho."

Itsuki's entire demeanor screamed, *"I've won this round!"* and no amount of glaring from Amane fazed him. Realizing there was no point in arguing further, Amane simply pressed his lips into a thin line and gave up.

Chapter 5

A Reliable Senpai

“What? You’re working on White Day, Fujimiya?”

Amane and Miyamoto had just wrapped up their shift and stopped by the whiteboard to check for any updates before heading out. Miyamoto scanned the notices posted for staff, then turned to Amane with a look of mild surprise.

Earlier, Fumika had mentioned that the March shift schedule was finalized, though it hadn’t been posted in the group chat yet. It was supposed to go out later, but Amane had decided to take a look in advance so he could plan ahead. Just as he was doing that, Miyamoto’s comment caught his attention.

From the sound of it, Amane’s shift request had been approved without a hitch.

“Ahh…about that,” Amane began.

“Wait—don’t tell me you two broke up or something.”

“Can you not say something so ominous? You’ll jinx it. Besides, if we had broken up, you’d see it all over my face. There’s no way I’d be able to show up to work. I’d be a wreck. I wouldn’t even see the point anymore.”

“My bad, my bad.”

Given the way Mahiru treated him, Amane couldn’t even picture her leaving. She was always right there, constantly expressing how much she cared, making him feel more loved than he ever thought possible. There was no real reason to worry…but just the idea sent a shiver down his spine. He shot Miyamoto a sharp look.

Honestly, as much as he didn’t want to believe it could happen, he knew he’d be devastated if he ever lost her. Work would be the least of his problems. He probably wouldn’t even have the will to drag himself to

school.

Losing the one person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with? That would be straight torture.

"Then why are you working on White Day of all days?"

"Ah…well, you see…my girlfriend just loves me *that* much…"

"Why do I have to listen to you brag about your girlfriend?"

"I'm not bragging."

Miyamoto shot him an exasperated glance, but Amane cut him off with a glare, silently telling him to let him finish.

"Okay, first of all…Mahiru's been wanting to visit the café for a while now. She said she wanted to see me in uniform, on the job."

"Oh yeah, I remember. But you told her not to come because you were too embarrassed, right? You definitely mentioned that before."

"…That's right. Wouldn't anyone feel awkward if someone close to them—girlfriend or not—showed up and saw them fumbling through a job they're still getting used to? Or worse, caught them screwing up and getting chewed out for it?"

"Yeah, I get it. Rino laughed at me for that exact thing."

"I can totally picture that smug grin on her face."

"She was cracking up. Anyway, I don't scold people in front of others. And honestly, I've never had a reason to scold you. Unlike a certain someone, you actually handle the equipment with care and haven't had any major screw-ups."

"Her siphon-breaking spree was a bit…"

"Yeah, even the owner struggled to keep a straight face during that. She wasn't *angry* exactly, but she gave a pretty firm warning. Even Rino knew she'd messed up and just took it on the chin."

Oohashi, for better or worse, had a naturally carefree—or maybe just care*less*—nature. She was fine now, but when she first started, she hadn't quite figured out her own strength and ended up snapping more than a few siphons in the process.

Breaking one might've been forgivable—but several in a row was a different story. Apparently, Fumika had pulled Oohashi aside and given her a pretty stern talking-to. It hadn't been a full-on scolding, but just serious

enough to leave her feeling guilty. Ever since then, she'd handled the equipment with extra care.

As Miyamoto stared off into the distance, probably replaying the scene in his head, Amane turned his attention back to the shift schedule posted on the board.

"So basically," Miyamoto said, "now that you're used to the job, you're okay with letting your girlfriend see you in action?"

"Pretty much. Also, the White Day menu has a few things I think she'd like, so I figured it'd be nice if she got to try them."

Sure, the main reason was finally letting Mahiru see him at work. But the café wasn't just about the coffee. Their food held its own, especially the seasonal specials.

Amane had already tasted the White Day desserts: white chocolate cake and pancakes with just the right amount of sweetness. Exactly the kind of thing Mahiru would love.

Since she was coming in anyway, he wanted to make sure she got to enjoy something truly delicious.

"Oh, obviously this isn't the only thing I've got planned for her. I also arranged for us to go shopping after my shift, so I asked to be scheduled for a really short one. The owner already gave me the okay."

"Yeah, I bet she gave you the green light with the biggest, most excited grin on her face…"

"Uh…yeah, pretty much."

The shortened White Day shift was something Amane had worked out with Fumika ahead of time. Even though it was just a part-time gig, leaving early wasn't something he could do without clearing it first. So he'd laid everything out honestly and asked for permission.

He'd never say it to her face, but deep down, he'd figured Fumika would not only understand but actively support him. And sure enough, she approved it with even more enthusiasm than he'd expected.

While relieved, he couldn't help feeling a little guilty about how smoothly it had gone.

Miyamoto shot him a sly grin. "Quite the schemer."

Amane sighed and hung his head with a small frown.

“Since we’re on the same shift that day, I just wanted to apologize in advance. I’ll be leaving early, so…sorry about that.”

“Hm? Ah, nah, don’t worry about it.” Miyamoto waved him off. “Honestly, I’d be more concerned if you *didn’t* put your girlfriend ahead of work. That’d just make me question what kind of guy you are. Days like this matter—you don’t skip them.”

With an easy chuckle, he ran a finger across the White Day schedule on the board, then shrugged. “That’s how you make fond memories, y’know? You cleared it ahead of time, and the owner adjusted the schedule to make up for it, right? That’s why we’ve got more people working that day. If something goes wrong, that’s on management—not you. Got it?”

“…Thank you.”

“Besides, the owner and I have decided not to count you as core staff anymore.”

“…Wait, what?”

“Ah—sorry, that came out wrong. I don’t mean just you, Fujimiya. Kayano too.”

“Kayano as well?”

“You guys are going to be prepping for university entrance exams starting this spring, right? There’ll be mock exams, prep classes, all sorts of stuff you can’t miss. We can’t pile too much work on you.”

It was clear they’d taken everything into account.

Both Amane and Souji would be moving into their third year next term. Exam season would officially start. Naturally, their schedules were about to get a lot tighter, and their work shifts would need to fit around all the studying and test prep.

Amane knew it was going to be tough, but he still chose to keep working. Until he saved up what he needed, quitting just wasn’t an option.

Even so, there were going to be obligations he couldn’t skip. For those, he’d have to request time off. And to make it all work, he knew he’d have to stay sharper than ever in school if he wanted to keep on top of both studying and work.

“Ah, I’m not saying you shouldn’t work or anything,” Miyamoto said with a chuckle, catching on to Amane’s unease. “We just know the exams

take priority, so we can't really count on you for the schedule. Skill-wise, though, you're definitely an asset. Don't worry about that."

He traced a finger along the blank space below the employee roster, casual as ever.

"The owner and I both know you and Kayano take the job seriously. You always do your part, never slack off, and you've never missed a shift. That's exactly why, if we did ask you to come in, you'd probably show up even if it was a pain for you… So, to stop that from happening, we're adding more staff to cover you guys." Then he glanced over at Amane. "Besides, you're not planning to stay on much longer anyway, right?"

"…I'm planning to quit around summer. I should have saved up what I need by then. And that's when exam prep really ramps up."

Amane planned to quit his job around the time third-year students stepped down from their club activities. It was something he'd discussed with Fumika right from the start, even before his first shift.

He hadn't settled on the exact item yet, but whatever he chose was going to cost several hundred thousand yen at the very least—double that if he went with a custom order.

With that goal in mind, he'd mapped out how many shifts he needed to take, and so far, his savings were right on track. At this pace, just like Miyamoto had said, he'd be able to quit by summer without any problems.

"Right? The owner and I figured that'd be your cutoff point, so we planned around it. You don't need to worry."

"Thank you so much… Also, Miyamoto-san, you're starting to sound like the owner."

"Probably because she talks to me about all this stuff. I've been around a while, so she tends to run these things by me," Miyamoto let out a mock groan. "She's working me way too hard for a part-timer," he muttered, though he didn't seem the least bit annoyed.

Amane chuckled under his breath.

"Well, I'll be buried in job hunting and my thesis before long, so I'll be in the same boat soon. But the owner gets that this is just part of hiring students. She's cool with it, so don't stress."

"Got it."

"…By the way, is what you're saving up for your girlfriend pretty expensive?" Miyamoto lowered his voice slightly, casting a curious glance at Amane. He looked like he wasn't sure he should ask but couldn't help himself.

Amane scratched at his cheek, trying to figure out the right way to answer. "Expensive? Well…yes. I do sometimes wonder if doing something like this as a student might be going a bit overboard."

What he wanted to give Mahiru wasn't just a gift—it was a promise. A formal commitment. Something she could wear as proof of what they meant to each other.

Before he'd started working, he'd done his research. He hadn't known much about jewelry, so he looked into it and quickly realized that what he had in mind would cost far more than what most students could afford. That old saying about spending three months' salary suddenly made a lot more sense to him.

Of course, there was no way Amane could reach that kind of benchmark. Not as a student. He had to choose something within his means. Not some cheap trinket, but something real and lasting. A precious vow wrapped around her slender finger.

Amane knew this wasn't something to take lightly. Most students wouldn't even think about making a commitment that might shape someone else's future, let alone risk tying them down.

But without missing a beat, Miyamoto said calmly, "Sounds to me like you're just devoted. If you're putting in that much time and effort just to give her this, then it has to mean something. Do you think she'll love it?"

"I do… I'd like to think it will make her happy. Saying that with total confidence feels a little arrogant, so I'll hold back."

"Then that's all that matters. Gotta say, for someone your age, you're really committed."

"I just love her that much."

People often said student relationships didn't last—that they were fleeting, lighthearted, or a bit of fun to pass the time. But to Amane, this was anything but temporary. He knew without a shred of doubt that she was the only one he would ever want to stand beside, protect, support, and bring

joy to.

A passionate heat burned inside him. Relentless yet as gentle as sunlight, it flickered in his chest like a steady flame, radiating a happiness so deep he could lose himself in it. It wasn't something fleeting. This fire wouldn't go out. It would always be there, keeping Amane's heart ablaze.

Ordinarily, feelings that intense would push people away. But Mahiru hadn't run—she'd embraced them. And in doing so, she had given him her own warmth in return. That unwavering flame now burned with both of their feelings. It no longer belonged to him alone—and he knew, without a doubt, it never would fade.

"It's gettin' hot in here, eh?"

"You're one to talk, Miyamoto-san."

The teasing didn't faze Amane one bit. He knew full well that Miyamoto had carried feelings for Oohashi for years, watching over her quietly and patiently. A man didn't keep looking at someone like that unless he truly loved them.

"…Shut up, you."

"Then maybe you should keep quiet too, Miyamoto-san. Unless you want me poking at your sore spots."

"Y-you ain't cute at all…"

"I've never been cute. No idea where you got that impression," Amane said with a laugh.

With an exaggerated sigh, Miyamoto scrubbed a hand through his hair, clearly flustered. Amane didn't bother pointing out the faint flush rising in his cheeks.

"Nah… You've definitely got more charm than Kayano, at least. That guy never asks for help—no matter how deep he's in it, he tries to power through on his own. And he's got a killer poker face. But you? The second you hit a wall, you actually ask for help. So yeah, I'd say you've got…maybe a millimeter of charm."

"A *millimeter,* huh…"

"What? You want more than that?"

"I'm good, thanks."

"Thought so… Anyway, don't sweat it. Just give the owner a heads-up,

and she'll work the schedule around you. And if you ever get stuck with work or university stuff, don't hesitate to reach out. I'll help however I can."

Miyamoto had finally shaken off his earlier embarrassment, and the sincerity in his voice landed squarely with Amane. He didn't have many adults close by that he could lean on.

His parents were reliable, of course, but they lived far away, which meant most things fell on him. That had been his choice, and it was one he didn't regret. But even so, hearing someone tell him it was okay to ask for help blew all his worries away.

"Thank you… You know, Miyamoto-san, you really give off big brother vibes."

"Oh? What's this? Planning to start calling me your *dear big bro* now?"

"Yeah, no thanks."

"You little—!"

"Hey—ow, ow, ow!"

Miyamoto immediately pulled him into a headlock, which, to Amane, felt totally unfair. But it only made the whole big brother thing feel more spot-on.

Groaning, "I give, I give!" Amane smacked Miyamoto's stomach with his palm like he was tapping out.

Chapter 6

Facing the Future

“This time of year always bogs me down…”

Amane wasn’t working today, so he and his friends decided to hold a study session in the classroom after school.

Chitose’s gloomy tone matched her words as they pushed their desks together, her expression every bit as dismal as her voice. She pulled a textbook from her bag with a sigh.

Both Itsuki and Chitose were serious about their studies and had the motivation to put in the effort. But unlike Itsuki, Chitose just didn’t enjoy studying, so it was hard for her to get excited. It wasn’t something worth scolding her for. Feeling unmotivated this time of year was completely normal. But forcing herself through it with no real drive would only make things harder.

Amane glanced over and saw her let out a long, tired sigh, already looking drained before they’d even started.

“Because we have a ridiculous amount to review?”

“Exactly. I was riding high from Valentine’s Day, and now it feels like I got shoved off a cliff. Why do we have to review everything from the whole year instead of just what was on the last test?”

Chitose groaned as she repeatedly smacked her textbook against her desk, clearly at her wit’s end. Mahiru’s eyes drifted to the already battered corners of Chitose’s book and gently warned, “You’re going to ruin it.”

For the record, Mahiru’s textbook was immaculate—no frays, no stains, no doodles. Just neat handwritten notes in the margins where necessary. Meanwhile, Chitose’s copy looked like it had survived a minor disaster, complete with flipbook animations and graffiti defacing historical figures.

“Well…we can’t exactly blame the teachers for assigning so much,”

Mahiru said. “It’s essentially a way for them to see how much we’ve retained over the year. And it also serves as practice for the university entrance exams. The real thing will cover far more than this.”

“Yeah, repetition helps stuff stick. If you’ve started to forget stuff, now’s the perfect time to brush up.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better! There’s *way* too much to review!”

With a dramatic *thwack*, Chitose smacked her textbook against the desk again. Amane could only watch in quiet sympathy as the poor, already-beaten book absorbed yet another blow.

“Our school does cram a lot into the first two years,” he muttered.

“You might as well accept it, Chi,” Itsuki chimed in. “We wouldn’t be in this mess now if we’d been more consistent with our studying. ”

“Ugh, that one stung…”

“This is when all that knowledge and those study habits start to matter, so let’s give it our best.”

“*Urk…*” Itsuki winced, even though Mahiru’s words were clearly directed at Chitose. Still, they weren’t wrong. No one could change the past, and their half-baked habits had finally caught up with them. All that was left now was to push forward.

“University entrance exams are a comprehensive test of everything we've learned, from elementary through high school. So let’s think of this as a form of practice for that. It's a valuable opportunity.”

“Waaaah!” Chitose wailed dramatically.

“By this time next year, things will be a lot easier,” Mahiru explained, trying to comfort her. “Third-years get a more flexible attendance schedule.”

Once students completed the Common Test for University Admissions and took their university entrance exams, they were no longer required to attend school daily—just on designated days. In theory, it gave them more freedom, though in reality, most still showed up out of habit. It didn’t feel quite as free as it sounded.

“Yeah, but we’ve got to get through hell first…”

“Everyone does,” Amane’s tone was flat. “There’s no way around it. You

could always choose not to go to university, but if that's your plan, you'd better have a solid backup for your future."

"That's so cold!"

"What, you thought I'd baby you?"

If kind, comforting words were all she needed, Amane could've given her those easily. But would that actually help her? He didn't think so. He didn't want to see her take the easy way out. More than anything, he wanted her to get where she dreamed of going—even if it meant sparking her motivation a little. Still, that wasn't exactly his area of expertise. If anyone could coax it out of her, it was Mahiru.

He briefly wondered what he'd do if Chitose ever did ask to be babied, but she put that thought to rest all on her own.

"Uh, no thanks. The idea of *you* going soft on me is just gross."

"I get what you're saying, but…could you maybe phrase it a little nicer?"

"But it's true! You think giving me reality checks is way better than coddling me and letting me slack off, right?"

"She's not wrong," Itsuki glanced at Amane. "You always do that, man. You let Shiina-san take care of the emotional support while you handle the tough love. It's like you two are running a good cop, bad cop setup. You know the blunt approach doesn't always go over well, so you take that role yourself. But when someone's actually feeling down, you hold back and wait for the right moment. You don't just blurt stuff out for the sake of it."

"…If you realized all that, then you didn't have to spell it out. Idiot."

Amane shot them a pointed look, clearly irritated by how spot-on their analysis was. Not that either of them looked the least bit sorry.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. But if we're talking about who's *really* strict, it's actually Mahirun," Chitose added with a sigh. "Sure, I've got plenty to work on, but still."

"I believe in you, Chitose-san. From everything I've seen so far, I'm confident you won't give up so easily."

"Hmm… You really know how to get people fired up, Mahirun."

Between the two of them, Mahiru was easily the stricter one. But what made her stand out was that she never felt strict. Her words and actions had a way of uplifting people, nudging them to better themselves without

making them feel pressured. Even when she gave firm instructions, they somehow came off as encouraging rather than harsh.

She'd been borderline merciless with Amane when they first met, and in her own words, that was because: *"If I'd tried to persuade you with sweet talk, you'd have just thought I was creepy."*

She really *was* perceptive.

"It's not like I don't want to study, okay?" Chitose muttered. "I'm just venting about how much of a pain it is. Doesn't mean I won't give it my all."

"We understand; don't worry."

Mahiru knew that Chitose's complaints were just her way of letting off steam. Once she actually sat down, she always followed through.

Despite her grumbling, Chitose had already pulled out her pencil case and notebook. She might've been dragging her feet, but she was clearly getting ready to work.

With a dramatic sigh, she spun her pen between her fingers, then caught it and turned to Mahiru, who was smiling at her in that usual calm, reassuring way.

"Don't you hate all this uni entrance exam stuff, Mahirun?"

"Hmm… If I had to pick, I'd say I do, yes."

“Oh. Surprising.”

Even Itsuki was stunned. He blinked a few times, eyes fixed on Mahiru like he couldn’t quite believe what he’d just heard.

Mahiru calmly traced a finger over the cover of the reference book she’d pulled out. Her expression remained serene as ever. Only Amane knew that she had already solved every problem in that book.

“I actually enjoy studying. I value learning things I didn’t know before and making that knowledge my own. It’s a great feeling when something that used to confuse me finally makes sense, or when I can do something I couldn’t before.”

She was naturally diligent, but beyond that, Mahiru was a surprisingly curious girl. She had a drive to explore and understand.

Because she genuinely enjoyed learning, she often read books or watched videos on all kinds of topics. She’d try out different hobbies, too, picking up new skills with ease. For her, gaining knowledge was never a chore.

But studying for entrance exams? That was a different story entirely.

“Studying for entrance exams feels somewhat different from the joy I usually find in learning.”

“Does it?”

“I mean, I do enjoy the subjects themselves,” Mahiru clarified. “But being forced to study them takes something away from it. I love learning new things on my own terms. But when I have to do it just because someone says I must…it loses a bit of that appeal. Still, I know it’s just part of being a student.” Mahiru’s wry smile shifted to a more conflicted one. “What do you think university is for?”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?” Chitose blinked. “I guess… I dunno, final prep before entering the workforce? A place to earn credentials and stuff?”

“That’s one way to look at it. In the end, it often becomes just that—a stepping stone to employment. Especially in a society that filters people by their academic history.”

Though universities served as both centers for research and education, Mahiru understood how the world tended to see them: as factories for producing job-ready adults.

"What about you, Mahirun? What do you think?"

"Well," Mahiru began, "I see university primarily as a place to pursue knowledge. Of course, I also understand its function as an educational institution to provide specialized training and a well-rounded education."

"…And does that tie into why you're not a fan of entrance exams?"

"Yes, actually." She nodded lightly. "To me, modern entrance exams feel like a way to shape people into fitting society's predefined molds. Universities these days feel less like places for exploration and growth and more like production lines meant to churn out students molded to be workers. When studying turns into just another step toward becoming a cog in the society machine, it's only natural to lose motivation. The passion for learning disappears when you're no longer doing it for yourself."

"…So, in plain English?"

"She's saying you'll study because you *have* to, but if you start seeing it as just a path to becoming another gear in the system, you'll lose the will to keep going," Amane clarified.

"More or less, yes," Mahiru confirmed with a small smile.

Amane had put it a bit bluntly, but he wasn't wrong. With a touch of amused approval, Mahiru gave him a soft round of applause.

"Despite what I've said," Mahiru continued, "I'm really not all that different from Chitose-san. Most students feel the same way about entrance exams. The only real difference is that I genuinely enjoy studying, whereas she doesn't."

"I see… I dunno how you can even enjoy studying."

"Hmm. For me, it's the sense of accomplishment. That moment when something that didn't make sense finally clicks. But I believe it's a little different for you, Chitose-san. I'd imagine you feel a stronger sense of achievement through action rather than study. For example, wouldn't you feel like you achieved something if you couldn't do a back hip circle at first, but practiced and eventually managed to pull it off?"

"Oh, definitely! I'd be like, 'Heck yeah, I did it!' Same with track. I get so

pumped when my time improves."

"It's not exactly the same," Mahiru admitted, "but that's how studying feels for me."

"Ooohh, now I get it!" Chitose's face lit up, her eyes wide with realization.

Of course, just understanding the comparison didn't magically make her like studying any more than before. The other three exchanged knowing glances, silently wondering what, if anything, could actually change that.

"Chi probably hates studying so much that even when she finally gets something, she's too drained to enjoy it. Like, 'Ugh, finally, it's over.' That kind of mood kills any joy she could get from learning," Itsuki said, thoughtfully.

"Yeah," Amane agreed. "She might feel a sense of relief from finishing, but not much actual satisfaction from understanding the material."

"Exactly! You two *get* me… Wait, hold on—why does it feel like you're dissecting my entire personality? Stop psychoanalyzing me! I feel exposed!"

"Well," Mahiru began, "now that we have you exposed, I believe the next step is figuring out how to boost your motivation."

The way she said it was perfectly innocent, but depending on how you heard it, it came off a little...questionable. Chitose instinctively crossed her arms over her chest, visibly startled. But Mahiru was already deep in thought, clearly trying to come up with ways to help like a true friend would.

Chitose, however, didn't see it that way. She looked like a small animal backed into a corner, trembling at how completely she'd been read. Meanwhile, Itsuki offered no rescue. His silence made it obvious that he, too, believed this was necessary.

"The easiest and most effective way is to reward yourself," Mahiru suggested.

"But don't reward yourself every time," Amane warned. "Otherwise, you'll get used to it and it won't work. You need rewards to stay focused, so while incentives are good to keep you going, the trick is to switch up how often you get them so they keep working."

"Yes, it's all about balancing reward and discipline," Mahiru agreed.

“You can’t rely on us to keep you motivated, either,” Amane added. “It’d be better if you found your own reward system. But in the end, it really comes down to how determined you are.”

“Ikkun, they’re scaring me…” Chitose whispered, inching closer to Itsuki.

“It’s for your own good, Chi. Just do it.”

“Meanie! Not you too, Ikkun!”

Chitose looked betrayed, but truthfully, she wasn’t being abandoned so much as carefully watched over. And just to be clear, Mahiru offered a reassuring smile and said, “Don’t worry. I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to.”

“Ideally, you should find what motivates you,” Mahiru proposed. “But honestly, if you don’t enjoy studying, that’s perfectly okay. Forcing yourself to like something often has the opposite effect. Being made to do something without being told why is especially unpleasant, and expecting someone to stay motivated under those conditions is just unrealistic.”

Nobody liked being told what to do without knowing the reason behind it. Real motivation didn’t come from pressure—it had to come from within. The most anyone else could do was create the right environment, give a gentle push, and hope that spark would catch on its own.

“But that’s reality,” Mahiru continued. “Whether you like it or not, you need to do it. So even if you don’t like studying, just do the bare minimum to get through. What matters is making sure your results don’t become obstacle to what you truly want to pursue in life.”

That’s why understanding was important. Sometimes, the heart wouldn’t budge until the mind accepted the logic. And sometimes, it was the other way around.

“What I want to pursue in life…”

“For example,” Mahiru began, “let’s say someday you decide on a career. And that job absolutely *requires* a certain qualification. Normally, you’d just go ahead and earn that qualification, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But what if…that qualification was only available to people with a university degree? What would you do then?”

“…Then I’d have to go to university.”

“Exactly. But if you hadn’t gone when you had the chance, you’d have to start from scratch later. And catching up? That could take at least two years—possibly even four. In that time, you’d probably find yourself thinking, *‘Ugh, I should’ve studied more back then. Maybe I shouldn’t have wasted so much time goofing off.’*”

As she spoke, Mahiru casually pulled a slip of paper from her notebook and began sketching. In a few quick strokes, she produced a chibi-style drawing of Chitose holding her head in despair. It was unexpectedly good—a testament to Mahiru’s curiosity and dedication to learning, even in the little things.

Amane couldn’t help but smile when he saw it.

“Well, that was just a hypothetical scenario. But I think everyone has moments where they look back and think, *‘I should’ve done this,’* or *‘I wish I’d tried harder.’* Those kinds of regrets tend to stick with you.”

Mahiru likely spoke from personal experience. Perhaps she had some personal regret she’d never shared. But even as she said it, her gaze stayed calm and steady. There was no sadness in her expression, no lingering bitterness. Just conviction as she looked at Chitose.

Chitose, on the other hand, looked uncertain. Her eyes wavered like ripples spreading across the surface of a still lake.

“To avoid such regrets, you need to work hard to open the right doors. That’s why studying has never felt like an obstacle to me.”

“Ahh… My parents used to say something like that, too,” Chitose shared. “They told me regret’s called ‘regret’ because it only hits after you’ve already made a mistake. So you should do everything you can not to leave any behind. They also told me to keep nurturing my curiosity and interests, since those are what expand your options in life.”

In Amane’s case, Shuuto and Shihoko had always taken a gentle, hands-off approach to parenting, letting him choose his own path. Even so, they often reminded him that getting things done early made a world of difference down the line. The effort he put in now would shape the life he’d have later.

Naturally, there were times when he pushed back. But when that happened, they never forced him. Instead, they patiently explained why it

mattered, encouraged him with the idea that he might end up enjoying it once he gave it a try, and sometimes even joined in to make the process less daunting. They always made sure to praise his effort, guiding him with support instead of pressure.

And when Amane expressed a genuine desire to take on something himself, they gave him the space to do it. He'd shaped into the person he was today thanks to their guidance and support.

"Now that I think about it," Amane said, "my parents always let me try anything I wanted. From the beginning, they taught me how valuable it is to take on challenges and how fulfilling it can be when you push through. I guess that's why I don't really mind studying. If I look at it as a way of preparing for the future, it actually feels kind of fun. Knowing it's worth doing makes it easier to give it my all."

"Shihoko-san and Shuuto-san must have taught you that mindset from a young age. Had they forced you to do things without explaining why, you might've ended up feeling very differently," Mahiru replied.

"Yeah, probably."

If Amane's parents had forced him to do things without giving reasons, he likely would have rebelled and been far less motivated than he was now.

"Anyway," he continued, "I think if you can convince yourself that the effort you put in now will pay off later, it'll be a little easier to stay motivated. I just…don't want you to have to give up what you want to do, Chitose."

Chitose let out a small sigh, her shoulders slumping just a little. "Deep down, I *do* know that…" She showed a crooked smile. "You and Mahirun have a good head on your shoulders. Seriously."

Her words were a mix of admiration and disbelief. Amane and Mahiru exchanged a wry smile. They were both well aware of their tendency to overanalyze things.

"They say nothing worth having comes easy. I don't believe in suffering for the sake of it, but…if I have to struggle, I'll struggle as many times as it takes. If enduring through hard times can make me a stronger person, then I think it's worth it."

For a moment, Mahiru's firm stance on self-improvement left Amane

speechless. Judging by their expressions, both Itsuki and Chitose felt the same way.

Mahiru flashed them a bright smile. “I still take it easy when I can. It’s not like I *enjoy* struggling. I just want to become someone I can be proud of. The important thing is to push yourself, but only within your limits.”

“Even so, Shiina-san…you’re so impressive. I’m genuinely touched,” Itsuki admitted. “I mean, yeah, better to regret doing something than regret not trying at all… Man, I really need to get my act together.”

Moved by Mahiru’s words, something shifted in him. Under the desk, where only Amane could see, Itsuki quietly clenched his fist. He’d always been the type to follow through on his goals, but he lacked a clear purpose. Not anymore. Now, it felt like he’d found his footing. His eyes had the steady look of someone ready to move forward.

Chitose sighed. “You guys are taking this super seriously, so I’d hate to be the only one dragging my feet. And…well, I have to do it anyway, so I might as well give it my best shot.”

“That’s the spirit. The rest is up to you, Chitose-san.”

Mahiru wouldn’t force her. She never had.

Chitose liked to joke that Mahiru was too strict about studying, but the truth was, she’d been the one to ask for help in the first place. Mahiru never forced anything. She understood better than anyone that motivation couldn’t be pressured into existence. But now, with the change in Chitose’s attitude, that was no longer a concern.

“I’ll do my best! I don’t want to end up separated from Ikkun. Worst case, we’ll just run away together, so I need to make sure I can support myself.”

“That's more like it. I’ll do what I can to help you, too. Now then, let’s get started on preparing for our end-of-year exams,” Mahiru urged.

“*AHHH—!!!*”

The moment had been serious, heartfelt even, with everyone sharing their renewed determination. And then, with a single line from Mahiru, it all came crashing down.

A high-pitched, trembling yelp burst out of Chitose—so shrill and pitiful it could only be described as a *screech*. It was more silly than serious, far

too cute to qualify as a proper scream.

Amane sighed, narrowing his eyes as he cast a deadpan glance in her direction.

"The moment we get back on track, you start shrieking. What gives?"

"She likely just remembered the horror that is the textbook in front of her. I believe in you, Chitose-san."

"You two sound so calm and collected, but how's *your* studying comin' along?" Itsuki asked.

"Me?" Amane answered. "I revise even when there's no test coming up. As far as the end-of-year exams go, I've been gradually working through the material and using reference books. Repetition's key if you want the information to stick."

"I study with Amane-kun," Mahiru replied, calm as ever. "And when I'm on my own, I usually review or go through reference books. So, there's really nothing for me to panic about."

Amane, for his part, made a habit of studying during his commute and again after getting home. Even with a part-time job, he made sure his grades never slipped. Reviewing the day's material, prepping for the next, and studying with Mahiru helped reinforce everything. It was a rhythm he'd long gotten used to.

Mahiru, on the other hand, had already worked her way through everything necessary for the university entrance exams. Most of her studying now was just consolidating what she already knew. Rather than focusing on daily schoolwork, she prioritized what would matter for the exams.

That's why she consistently held the top spot in their class. Her intelligence wasn't just a matter of talent—it was the result of focused, consistent effort.

"I should've known better than to ask these two…" Itsuki muttered. "Chi, let's just do our best, okay?"

"Yeah…"

While Amane and Mahiru tilted their heads, genuinely puzzled as to why studying regularly wasn't the norm, Itsuki and Chitose could only sigh and slump in defeat.

Chapter 7

A Secret to Keep

Since exams were just around the corner, Amane didn't have as many shifts as usual. After wrapping up his classes for the day, he headed straight home and dove into studying.

Today was a little different, though. There had been one less period than usual, Mahiru was busy tutoring Chitose one-on-one and wouldn't be around until dinner, and—perhaps most notably—Itsuki had invited himself over.

Amane had figured that Itsuki would just study at home, but apparently, his dad being around made it hard to concentrate. So instead, he'd decided to hole up at Amane's place for the day.

Amane didn't mind, so long as Itsuki kept quiet and actually studied. Besides, with two people, they could quiz each other, which was an efficient way to review, so he didn't see any reason to turn him away. Still, Itsuki didn't seem quite like himself today.

What's got him so down? Amane glanced across the low table. Itsuki must've noticed the look, because he gave a faint, bitter smile.

"It's nothing serious. Just that something my dad said this morning stuck with me."

Itsuki didn't go into detail, but in moments like this, it was usually safe to assume there'd been some kind of disagreement.

Lately, Amane had noticed Itsuki was taking his studies more seriously than ever. Even so, had Daiki—Itsuki's father—said something that hit a nerve?

"Still in a cold war with Daiki-san?" Amane asked.

"Cold war might be generous. We barely talk at all."

"Pretty sure that *is* a cold war."

“Honestly, we didn’t talk much even before he started pushing the whole ‘take over the family business’ thing.”

From the way Itsuki put it, he had a rather cold relationship with his family in general. Still, Amane felt it wasn’t his place to comment.

Unlike Itsuki, Amane had never gone through a rebellious phase in middle school. He’d always had a decent relationship with his parents, which made him something of an outlier. Most people didn’t stay on such easy terms with their family.

Itsuki had even joked once that he’d trade parents with Amane if he could. The fact that he’d said it at all hinted at just how deep the resentment ran…most likely toward Daiki.

“I wasn’t even the backup plan,” Itsuki scoffed. “Just kind of…the leftover. So they didn’t really care what I did. In that sense, I guess we actually talk more now than we used to.”

“…Not sure that’s much of an improvement.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

With a tired sigh, Itsuki held up his study sheet next to his reference book. He didn’t seem completely down, just drained. His shoulders sagged as he lowered his head.

He kept his eyes averted for a while, gathering his thoughts in silence. Then, slowly, he looked up again—this time with a spark of renewed determination in his eyes.

“But there’s nothing I can do. My dad’s stubborn. If anything’s going to change, it has to be me. It’s faster to change yourself than to try changing someone else.”

Itsuki said it with quiet conviction, his gaze steady and clear.

Seeing that determined light in his eyes, Amane felt like he was staring into something almost dazzling. He instinctively narrowed his own.

“You’ve changed,” Amane said.

“See? Told you. It’s quicker to change yourself.”

“…Yeah. You’re not wrong.”

Amane knew that from experience. He’d changed too, and because of that, he could agree without hesitation.

When he and Mahiru had first started dating, plenty of people had said

they didn't match. But as he grew more confident, those voices faded into the background.

He had worked hard to become someone who could stand proudly beside Mahiru. Eventually, people either came to terms with that fact—or just stopped paying attention.

Itsuki's circumstances were different, but the truth behind it all was the same. Nothing would get better unless he made the change himself. Waiting on someone else to shift course would take forever. It was always faster to take the future into your own hands.

My mindset's changed so much over the past year, Amane thought to himself.

Then Itsuki said, "Well, in the end, what I need to do hasn't changed. I just have to keep doing my part—prove I can take my responsibilities as a student seriously. I was never a troublemaker, so that alone should be enough to earn back at least a little trust."

"Daiki-san is…not the easiest person to handle. He's difficult."

From Amane's perspective, Itsuki's father came off as someone remarkably awkward regarding personal relationships. He always had a way of picking the wrong words, like he didn't know how to express what he actually felt.

Strangely enough, when Itsuki wasn't around, Daiki was a perfectly approachable guy. It seemed like his difficulties only surfaced when it came to his own son.

Still, there wasn't much Amane could do to mediate. Getting involved in someone else's family drama would only make things messier. All he could do was be there, keeping an eye on things and offering Itsuki a place to breathe when he needed it.

"He's never *not* been difficult, man," Itsuki muttered. "Half the time, I can't even tell what's going through his head. But at the very least, as long as I keep my act together, he's stopped nagging. I guess that's his way of meeting me halfway… I have no idea what this morning was about, though."

"My bet is that he just doesn't know how to interact with you, so he keeps his distance."

"That might be part of it, but still…"

“Hm?”

“I mean, seriously—why…? Why do dads just give up on actually using words? Do they think we’re supposed to magically understand them just by watching their backs as they walk away? Are they stupid? How do they expect someone they barely talk to to figure out what they’re trying to say from vague half-gestures and silence? Have they never learned that real communication means actually talking to the other person?”

“Uh, I mean…not *all* dads are like that…”

“Yeah, I know that. But mine? He’s hopeless. He wants to be understood so badly, but he won’t say anything. Is he one of those ‘figure it out yourself’ types? Like, ‘you should just know what I mean’? Well, I *don’t*! And that’s exactly why I’m pissed off!”

“Okay, okay, breathe. I get you’ve got a lot going on, but maybe ease off a little.”

Itsuki’s voice was sharp and restless, making his frustration apparent. Wanting to ease the tension, Amane stood and quietly made his way to the kitchen. Maybe a small distraction would help.

From behind him, he could still hear Itsuki grumbling in the living room. *Must be rough*, Amane thought, though he figured offering sympathy outright wouldn’t bode well with him.

He opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of chilled sparkling water. Something refreshing might help cool his friend’s overheated thoughts. He poured a glass, set it on a tray, and grabbed a bag of potato chips for good measure.

“Ugh, this is seriously frustrating,” Itsuki whined. “Sometimes I really envy your parents. They actually listen. They’re kind. They look out for you without constantly trying to control you.”

“I mean, thanks, but…”

Amane walked back into the room and set the tray on the low table between them. Itsuki shot Amane a jealous look.

“Just for the record,” Amane said as he grabbed a pack of wet wipes from the dining table and placed them beside the tray, “my parents don’t let me do whatever I want. They scold me when I deserve it.”

Amane couldn’t shake the feeling that Itsuki had put Shuuto and

Shihoko on a bit of a pedestal.

His parents did treat him with respect—they saw him as an individual first, not just their son. From Amane's perspective, they were good people, and he held them in high regard. But even so, he couldn't help wondering if Itsuki was viewing them through rose-colored glasses simply because they were nothing like Daiki.

"You say that, but I bet you don't get scolded much," Itsuki shot back.

"I guess not, if you're talking about how often I cause trouble. But they still call me out when I need it… They just hear me out first."

His parents never jumped to scold him without listening. They believed most actions had some kind of reasoning behind them, and it wouldn't be fair to judge without understanding it. Unless he'd done something outright reckless, they always gave him the chance to explain himself before punishing him. Whether or not they agreed afterward was a different story entirely.

As he poured the potato chips onto the plate, Amane found himself thinking back to his childhood. Even then, he couldn't remember a time when his parents had punished him with a heavy hand. In that sense, maybe they had been a little soft on him.

"Can't you spare, like, ten percent of that patience and level-headedness for my dad? Maybe slip some wisdom into his tea or something?"

"No can do."

"Tch."

Itsuki clicked his tongue in mock disappointment, but he clearly wasn't expecting a real solution. He grabbed a potato chip and tossed it into his mouth.

Amane was quietly relieved to see him unwind, even a little. The tension in the room eased, and he shifted in his seat, leaning back.

"All right, enough whining. Get back to studying. You want to prove Daiki-san wrong, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it… Ah, crap—I don't remember any of this."

"Think back. We went over that four months ago."

"It's crazy how fast you forget stuff if you don't review it again and again…"

Itsuki slumped forward, staring at his world history notes in dismay. Judging by his face, he'd forgotten the entire timeline of events. Without a word, Amane reached into his bag and pulled out a thick reference book. He set it down right in front of Itsuki.

"Drill it back in," he instructed.

Itsuki groaned, shooting him a resentful yet slightly amused look. "You're a super strict teacher, too…"

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For a while, they worked in silence, solving problems from reference books and quizzing each other. But focus only lasted so long. After a little over an hour of studying, Amane finally set down his mechanical pencil, letting it roll across the desk as he declared a break.

It seemed Itsuki's concentration was starting to slip as well. The moment Amane suggested a break, he readily agreed, stretching his arms overhead with a groan.

His body had gone stiff from sitting too long. As he rolled his shoulders to loosen up, he let out a breath, the faint fatigue on his face showing just how focused he'd been.

"You were really zoned in," Amane remarked.

"Well, yeah. My future's on the line."

Hunching his shoulders slightly, Itsuki crunched down on a potato chip. He'd prioritized studying over snacks until now.

When Itsuki mentioned his future, Amane knew he was talking about his future with Chitose.

How far ahead is he actually thinking? Amane couldn't help but wonder.

"You're considering…uhh, marrying Chitose in the future, right?"

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't go to the trouble of rebelling against my dad."

Itsuki had said something like that before, so Amane wasn't surprised by the answer. Still, hearing him say it so openly left him feeling a little flustered. At the same time, he felt relieved. Amane wasn't the only one who saw his girlfriend as someone to build a future with.

If a high schooler talked about their relationship that seriously, most people would laugh it off. Miyamoto might understand, but generally, high school romances were seen as fleeting experiences that weren't built to last into the future.

"…Itsuki, what made you fall for Chitose?"

The question slipped out before Amane even realized it, and in response, Itsuki smirked.

"Oh? What's this? *Amane-kun's* in the mood for love stories now?"

"Th-that's not it," Amane hurriedly denied. "I just wasn't around when you two first got together. I know how you are now, but I don't know what things were like back then. And I don't usually ask about this kind of stuff, so I just got curious."

Since Amane had only moved to the area in high school, he hadn't seen how things were between Itsuki and Chitose before they started dating. He'd heard a brief summary of their story, but nothing in detail. Neither Itsuki nor Chitose had ever opened up to him about it.

Amane had never pressed for more. He knew pushing too far out of curiosity might bring up things they'd rather not discuss. But seeing how earnestly Itsuki worked toward a future with Chitose, Amane could truly feel how much he loved her.

And that made him wonder—*What was it about Chitose that made Itsuki want to spend the rest of his life with her?*

"I'm not trying to pressure you or anything," Amane added, waving a hand dismissively.

But Itsuki didn't look bothered in the slightest. In fact, his fatigue from earlier melted away, replaced by a warm expression like he was basking in a quiet patch of afternoon sun.

"Honestly? I love everything about her. Her face, her body, her personality. When you fall for someone, you fall for *all* of them. I love how friendly she is with everyone, how full of energy she is, how fun she makes everything… even when she gets a little carried away and makes a mess of things."

"And how she turns into a culinary hazard the second you look away?" Amane teased.

Itsuki gave a sheepish laugh. “It’s kinda cute, in its own way.”

“I’m just hoping she stops adding new casualties to the list,” Amane muttered.

“Relax. My stomach’ll tank the damage for everyone.”

“Really? Then why do *I* always take the hit when your so-called defense fails?”

“Oops. Forgot to equip you with a shield.”

“Dude, take the hit yourself!”

Annoyed, Amane gave him a light kick under the table, grumbling, “The heck, man…”

Itsuki just grinned, totally unfazed.

“Anyway, as long as Chi’s enjoying herself, that’s what matters. I love how open she is with her feelings and how bright and honest she is. Really, I just…love everything about her. Also, we’re kind of partners in crime. Kindred spirits, you get me?”

“What?”

“I mean, maybe we were drawn to each other *because* we’re so alike.”

For a moment, Amane froze, trying to fully process what Itsuki had just said. But Itsuki didn’t seem like he intended to explain any further. He simply smiled, calm and content.

“I took it all in—pity, guilt, even that twisted sense of pleasure—and in the end, I still love her. Maybe it didn’t start off pure, but now…I love all of her. No exceptions.”

Itsuki had never gone into detail about what had happened between them. But whatever it was, they’d clearly gone through it together—and chosen to stay together.

If nothing else, Amane was certain of one thing: Itsuki and Chitose truly loved each other.

“Well, I won’t poke any further. If you love her, that’s all that matters. As long as you’re both on the same page, it’s not my place to say anything.”

“Exactly. We’ve got our own kind of love…just like you and Shiina-san have yours.”

“…Yeah. You’re right.”

Love wasn’t some uniform, one-size-fits-all thing. Every relationship

had its own shape, molded by emotions, circumstances, and shared moments. What Amane and Mahiru valued and what Itsuki and Chitose valued weren't the same. They didn't have to be.

In the end, what mattered was understanding. Acceptance. As long as the people in the relationship saw and embraced each other for who they were, everything else was irrelevant, whether it be outsiders' opinions or differences in how they express their love.

"All right, your turn now. Since I opened up, it's only fair that you do too, right?" Itsuki smirked.

"What?! That's not how this works!"

"Come on, man, expressing your feelings is important! Tell me all about your love for Shiina-san. In *full detail*."

Itsuki said, wiping his hands with a wet tissue. Then, he casually picked up his phone and turned to Amane, his warm smile curling into a mischievous grin.

Amane could already see where this was going. However, being told out of the blue to start professing his love for Mahiru was just too sudden. There was no way he could confess his feelings so openly like that.

"Talk about my love?" Amane groaned. "Seriously?"

"Look, it's obvious from how you act that you really love her. But you don't say it out loud that much, do you? At least not to me."

"And why *should* I? I already told you what I love about Mahiru before."

"We're on the topic, man. Might as well tell me again."

"What kind of logic is that, you idiot?"

"C'mooon, what's the harm? Feelings should be put into words. Words matter."

Amane sighed. "I do tell Mahiru. I don't just expect her to figure it out from how I act. I don't want her to feel unsure about how I feel."

Amane agreed that expressing emotions with words was important. But even so, if he put his feelings into words, they were meant for Mahiru's ears only.

"Ohh, look at you. So serious and rational. You get what girls worry about, huh?"

"Well, *words matter*, don't they?"

“Hah, they sure do.”

“I don’t think Mahiru doubts how I feel. She trusts me. But I don’t ever want to take that for granted or start getting careless. Yeah, I say those things for her, but it’s also about the kind of person I want to be… Maybe she trusts me because she knows that’s the kind of person I am.”

Amane wasn’t exactly the smooth-talking type. But that didn’t mean he avoided expressing himself. He believed that affection and appreciation should be put into words. It made things easier and clearer for both of them. And most importantly, it made Mahiru happy. This was why Amane tried to tell her his feelings through words wherever he could.

Even without words, Mahiru was sharp enough to understand his feelings. But expecting her to figure things out herself instead of telling her directly felt selfish and immature. Though they had sensed each other’s feelings and waited for the right moment, Mahiru ultimately took the first step in confessing. That fact left Amane keenly aware of his own shortcomings.

Since they started dating, Amane had expressed himself clearly to reassure Mahiru. He didn’t want her to ever feel unsure or anxious. So he always told her how he felt.

If something as simple as voicing his emotions could bring her peace of mind, then of course he’d do it. There was no reason to hold back.

My relationship with Mahiru isn’t so flimsy that Itsuki needs to worry about it, Amane thought, casting a sideways glance.

But to his surprise, Itsuki looked genuinely impressed, hand resting on his chin as he nodded slowly.

“Shiina-san’s got a sharp eye, doesn’t she? She fell for you, a guy who's somehow both direct and ridiculously stubborn at the same time. Easy to read, but impossible to figure out.”

“Wait, hold on. That’s seriously how you see me?”

“Nyah ha ha~ When we first met, you had that whole aloof, *too cool for this* vibe.”

“Cut it out. You don’t have to bring up my cringey past.”

“Pfft, you actually got embarrassed. That’s hilarious.”

“You little—”

Thinking back on how he used to be made Amane want to sink through the floor. There were plenty of things he regretted. But maybe that was why he could really appreciate what it meant for someone like Itsuki to reach out back then.

That didn't mean he was just going to sit there and take the teasing, though. Narrowing his eyes, he shot a sharp glare across the table.

Naturally, Itsuki just grinned and brushed it off, unfazed. "Hey, if we're talking embarrassing pasts, mine's way worse. There's a ton I wish I could forget. At least you changed after you met Shiina-san."

"It's annoying how your prediction back then came true."

"Oh, you mean when I said, *'Sooner or later, you're gonna change'?* Yeah, you were already starting to. It just didn't look like much at the time."

Itsuki's grin only got wider, which made Amane scowl even harder. Without hesitation, he gave him another swift kick under the table. As usual, it had no effect whatsoever.

"…You're so annoying," Amane muttered, but Itsuki just kept wearing that smug grin like a badge of honor.

Feeling oddly flustered, Amane ran a hand through his hair and let out a slow breath to settle himself.

"…Still. I was able to change because of Mahiru, and you guys, too. So…thanks."

Saying it out loud felt even more embarrassing than confessing his feelings to Mahiru. But he felt like he had to say it. Itsuki had just said that feelings should be spoken, and Amane had agreed with him.

So he held back the usual sarcasm and jokes. This wasn't the moment for that.

"Oh? So you can be honest sometimes. Look at you."

"Don't mock me. I know how you operate."

"Tee-hee~!" Itsuki stuck his tongue out in a cute gesture that looked completely wrong on a high school guy. Amane didn't even dignify it with a response. He just stared, flat and unimpressed.

Realizing he'd absolutely killed the mood, Itsuki waved a hand through the air, like he could shoo away the awkward chill clinging to the room that even the air conditioning couldn't blow away.

“You’re such a buzzkill sometimes,” he said, completely unashamed. “But hey. If nothing else, that just proves how much you love Shiina-san. People don’t change that easily without a reason. It takes a ridiculous amount of energy to start, and sometimes it hurts like hell. The power of love is amazing.”

Itsuki wasn’t just saying that for the sake of it. He knew exactly how hard change could be. He was working on himself, too. That was why he didn’t tease Amane this time. His words might’ve been wrapped in humor, but his genuine expression made his sincerity come through loud and clear.

Amane groaned in embarrassment. He accepted the compliment but pressed his lips together to keep a straight face. Of course, Itsuki saw right through him.

Annoyed, Amane shot him a sharper, more pointed glare. Itsuki, completely unfazed, just chuckled.

“I’ll ask again: what do you love about Shiina-san?”

This time, Itsuki’s question was sincere and couldn’t be mistaken for teasing at all. He genuinely wanted to know the answer.

Amane took a breath and answered slowly. “…Everything.”

“I know that already. I can’t believe you said it without hesitation, though.”

“Of course. If I didn’t feel that way, I wouldn’t want to be by her side forever.”

He cast a glance at Itsuki, recalling how he’d said something similar earlier. Now, though, Itsuki just chuckled again, amused by the honesty in Amane’s reply.

But for Amane, there wasn’t a single part of Mahiru he didn’t cherish. He couldn’t narrow it down to one thing. She was precious to him in every way.

Sure, she could be difficult at times. But that was just part of who she was, and he loved her all the same.

“I admire how she’s always striving toward her goals. It’s not ideal how she pushes herself too hard and fails to notice when she’s about to burn out, but that’s when I step in to support her. And…I love how she’s kind of lonely, even though she tries to hide it. I also love how she doesn’t always

know how to ask for affection. It makes her even cuter when she does."

"Dang, you're not holding back at all. So sweet."

"You literally asked. I'll stop if you complain."

"Okay, okay, my bad… But hey, what about her looks? Or her talents? I don't think I've ever heard you talk about that."

"Of course, she's cute, and I think it's incredible how much she's accomplished through pure effort. But that's not the only reason I fell for her—it's just one of many. And it's less about what she's accomplished and more about how disciplined she is. She consistently pushes herself to grow. I respect that side of her so much."

Mahiru was commonly praised for her looks and her abilities. While Amane certainly appreciated those traits, that wasn't what drew him in. What captivated him was her heart and how she lived her life.

"…Thinking about it, what I love most about Mahiru is her soul."

"Her soul?"

"Yeah. I mean, sure, I love how beautiful she is, how hard she works, and how she never holds back when showing how she feels about me. But beyond all that…I love the way she finds joy in the smallest things. I love how just being around her feels comfortable, even when we're not doing anything in particular. I love how nice we feel when we experience things together, how we can laugh it off when things go wrong. How we recognize and appreciate each other's efforts. How we can hold hands and keep moving forward, looking toward the same future. And most of all, I love that she has the kind of heart that welcomes our differences instead of fearing them."

Amane had never been someone driven by strong desires. Maybe that was why simply being near Mahiru, sharing quiet moments, and finding joy in the everyday felt like the greatest happiness he could imagine. To have someone by his side with whom he could truly treasure ordinary life…how wonderful was that?

Even without much experience in building deep connections, Amane knew that what they had was something special.

With Mahiru, he could imagine living a calm, peaceful life filled with small, everyday joys. He was sure of it.

If they cracked an egg and found two yolks, she'd light up with a smile, and they'd celebrate that tiny bit of unexpected luck.

It was nothing short of a blessing that Amane found a girl like Mahiru. How could he not love her?

"We can spend time together, just be ourselves, see each other for who we really are, and live a quiet, stress-free life… And I think part of that is because, deep down, we're alike. Loving her feels natural."

Amane loved Mahiru more than anything in the world. The simple fact that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with the biggest proof.

"So basically, I want her to be the girl by my side. I want her to be the happiest girl in the world, and I want to be the guy to make that happen. That's how much I love her. Though I know that's not exactly a textbook answer, is it?"

Rather than list off traits or moments, Amane had just spoken from the heart. He loved her because she was her. That was all there was to it. Maybe it wasn't the kind of answer Itsuki wanted, but it was a true one.

It was only after saying it all out loud that Amane noticed how closely Itsuki had been listening. His face was unusually serious, like he'd taken in every single word.

A wave of heat suddenly rushed to Amane's cheeks. That was far too much emotion to dump on a friend. He had braced himself, waiting to be teased or to be met with disbelief. But none of that came. To his surprise, Itsuki gave a small nod, as if everything Amane said made perfect sense.

"That's real love, man. Kinda makes me want to let Shiina-san hear all that."

"Absolutely not. There's no way I'm saying that embarrassing stuff a second time. You'd better forget I said anything, too."

"I won't!"

Amane winced. *What's the fastest way to induce memory loss?* He shot Itsuki a sharp glare, silently commanding him to forget their entire conversation.

But Itsuki just grinned, "Hey now, easy with the death glare."

He was far too amused for Amane's liking.

"By the way," he added, tilting his head, "does that mean you wouldn't

actually mind if Shiina-san heard all that?"

"…I mean, it wouldn't be a big deal or anything. But that's not the point. I'm not going on some emotional rant like that again. Besides, I tell Mahiru I love her properly. All the time."

"Ohhh, do you now?"

"Wipe that smug grin off your face." Amane leveled him with a look that warned, *"Push your luck any further and I'll seriously get pissed."*

"All right, all right. My bad." Itsuki got the hint, kind of. He offered a half-hearted apology while idly thumbing through his phone.

In one ear and out the other, huh? Amane looked even more unimpressed. He silently wished that Itsuki would stop messing around. But, predictably, it was like a tumbleweed rolled right through his brain.

"And so," Itsuki said, without missing a beat, "you've been working as hard as you can this whole time to prove your love."

"…Something wrong with that?"

"Nope. Actually, I respect it. You're devoted, steady, and stay focused without getting distracted. You've got an inner strength I never had."

"What are you talking about? You do have that strength. You're a guy who sees things through," Amane stated.

Itsuki was always quick to call out Amane's insecurities, but truthfully, he wasn't so great at recognizing his own.

Sure, Itsuki might go with the flow and mess around at times. But he wasn't careless, and he definitely wasn't directionless. When he set his mind to something, he followed through on it. He had the resolve and capability to back it up. Once he committed, he stuck with it, and his determination and persistence were outstanding.

If anything, it was Itsuki who didn't realize his own worth.

Why can't he see himself clearly when it actually counts…?

Amane sighed. He couldn't believe it. He gave his friend a long, blank stare, astonished at just how little credit he gave himself.

This caught Itsuki by surprise. He was stunned.

Why was that what surprised him? Amane thought. *Did he really have no idea how capable he was?*

"Why do you look so surprised? You're persistent and straightforward

when it really counts, aren't you?" Amane pressed.

"…I'd love it if I could live up to that description."

"And you *will*. Right?"

"Of course. Just watch."

"That's what I like to hear."

The hesitation in Itsuki's voice had faded, and the uncertainty that had flickered in his eyes was gone. When he looked at Amane now, there was willpower behind his gaze.

"Look, your hands and your brain have stopped working. Quit talking and get back to studying."

Their break had gone on way longer than intended. A quick glance at the clock confirmed it had stretched far past what Amane had originally allowed himself.

Reaffirming his feelings for Mahiru had been nice, but Amane certainly wasn't expecting to rant about it to Itsuki. The embarrassment still prickled under his skin. Still, he'd said nothing but the truth. And he didn't regret saying any of it.

That said, he was on dinner duty tonight, and they couldn't afford to keep slacking. If they didn't buckle down, their whole study session would vanish before they got anything done.

"C'mon, let's concentrate." Amane picked up the mechanical pencil that had rolled to his side of the table and flicked it toward Itsuki.

Itsuki laughed. "Wow, strict."

"Strict is exactly what you need right now."

"No mercy, huh…"

Despite the exaggerated complaint, Itsuki's shoulders shook with laughter. Relieved, Amane picked up his own pencil, ready to focus again.

Chapter 8

White Day Reservations

With the nightmare that was end-of-year exams finally behind them, Amane and Mahiru eased back into the relaxed routine they'd enjoyed just weeks earlier. They'd gone into the exams fully prepared, but nothing beat the rush of freedom that came with knowing there were no more academic responsibilities looming over them.

For the past two weeks, their lives had been an endless loop of studying, eating, and tidying up. So now, just sitting at the table after dinner, chatting without a single care, felt like a breath of fresh air.

They knew this calm wouldn't last forever, but with exams behind them, the relief and satisfaction were palpable. For now, at least, they were content to slow down and enjoy the peace.

As Amane basked in the relaxed atmosphere, he happened to glance at the date on his phone. February was already drawing to a close, and White Day was just around the corner. He hadn't brought it up to Mahiru yet.

He'd thought about mentioning it earlier, but with both of them buried in exam prep, he didn't want to risk throwing Mahiru off balance. If he brought it up, she might have taken it as motivation, something to look forward to after the exams. But just as easily, it could've turned into a distraction that made her lose concentration. After weighing both sides, he'd decided to keep it to himself until the tests were behind them.

Mahiru was always serious about her studies, so Amane couldn't see her losing all focus. But still, there was no reason to add anything that might stir her thoughts more than necessary.

But now felt like the right time.

"Mahiru, can I borrow you for a sec?"

Amane stood up and called out to her. Mahiru, comfortably full and

lounging in contentment, glanced over at him with a curious look.

"Sure, just one second. I need to put the leftover meat sauce in the fridge."

"I'll do that while I'm here. Go ahead and relax on the sofa. Thanks for everything, as always."

On the days he didn't have work, Amane usually took over the cleanup. But when he was busy, dinner duties fell entirely to Mahiru. Which was why, on nights like this, he felt it was only fair to handle things himself.

Before she could protest, he gathered her dishes along with his and headed to the kitchen, wanting to give her a break after all the effort she'd put in.

From across the counter, Mahiru gave him a flat, mildly displeased look. "Hmph… You stole my job."

"You've been carrying more of the load since I started working, so at least let me handle this. Just relax, Mahiru."

"Didn't you have something you wanted to talk about?"

"That can wait until you've settled in."

Having an important conversation with unfinished chores hanging over them just felt wrong. They would linger in the back of Mahiru's mind, too, and Amane figured it was better to wrap things up first.

Fortunately, it wouldn't take longer than ten minutes to wash the dishes and pack up the leftovers. Then they could sit down and talk without anything nagging at them.

He meant to get it done quickly, but before he could stop her, Mahiru—looking just a little exasperated—walked over and took her usual place beside him in the kitchen.

Her expression seemed to say, *"Honestly, what am I going to do with you?"* But there was happiness in her eyes.

"In that case, it'll be faster if we do it together. I'll store the leftovers, so you handle the dishes, Amane-kun."

With practiced ease, Mahiru began neatly portioning out meals for the next few days. Amane glanced over at her and let out a quiet chuckle.

"…Thanks."

"That's my line… Geez." Mahiru gave him a playful nudge with her

shoulder, pouting slightly.

Smiling, Amane bumped her back more gently than she had. He then scraped off the last stubborn bits of meat sauce stuck to the plate.

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Just like Mahiru had said, working together was way faster than doing it alone. Before long, the kitchen was spotless, and the two of them were back in the living room, comfortably settled on the sofa.

Wanting to do at least this much for her, Amane had brewed Mahiru's favorite tea. Now she sat nestled against him, gently blowing on her cup to cool it.

Amane breathed in the warm aroma of his milk coffee as he waited for Mahiru to fully relax.

"So, what's the matter?" As the steam from her tea began to fade, Mahiru set her cup on the low table and looked up at him.

The straightforward question made Amane feel a little self-conscious, but with Mahiru gazing at him so directly, he couldn't keep her waiting. Instead, he quietly reached out and took the small hand resting beside him.

Her fingers, loosely curled, didn't pull away. As his fingers traced along her skin, she accepted his touch readily.

"What's the matter? Did something bad happen?" she asked.

"No, it's nothing like that… If anything, I think it's something you'd enjoy," Amane said as he laced their fingers together. However, the timing made it feel more like a nervous gesture than one purely born of affection.

Clearing his throat with a small cough, Amane glanced at Mahiru. Her soft, relaxed expression had shifted into one of curious anticipation, her eyes blinking in surprise. In that moment, there was something almost childlike in the way she looked at him.

"Mahiru, you asked me about my preferences for Valentine's, right?"

"Yes. I wanted to make sure you'd be happy with it."

"Well…in the same way, I want to make sure I get you something you'll love too."

“In other words, you wish to ask about my White Day gift?”

“You’re too good at reading between the lines.”

Amane might have been trying to build the moment up slowly, but Mahiru’s uncanny ability to immediately catch on never failed to impress him.

“You made it so obvious, so of course I would catch on. We are close, aren’t we?”

Mahiru gave his hand a gentle squeeze, her warm smile lighting up her face. Amane let out a soft chuckle, once again reminded that when it came to her, he was always one step behind.

“Well…here’s the thing. You assumed I was going to ask, but that’s not quite it. Actually…I’ve already decided on your White Day gift.”

“Oh my, that’s not what you led me to believe earlier. So why bring it up at all?”

“Technically, I’m not asking what you want. It’s just…remember how I told you in advance that I was planning something for your birthday? I figured springing too many surprises on you might not be the best idea.”

“Yes, I remember.”

Surprises didn’t always make people happy. More often than not, they served the satisfaction of the person planning them, rather than the one receiving them. And sometimes, they could leave the other person feeling more uncomfortable than delighted.

That was exactly why Amane had taken such care when it came to Mahiru’s birthday. He knew those days hadn’t always been kind to her. Before making any real plans, he’d asked for her permission. He made sure she was comfortable with the idea first and foremost.

“That’s why I wanted to clear things up this time too, so there wouldn’t be any misunderstandings or weird tension. I’d hate for you to feel even a little uncomfortable over something that’s meant to be a gift from me. If that happened, I’d end up feeling awful.”

“I see. Thank you for being so thoughtful. But I really do understand, and I don’t think you need to worry. If it’s something you picked out with me in mind, Amane-kun, I’m sure I’ll be happy with it no matter what.”

“It’s *because* I know you’d be happy with anything that it’s hard to

decide!”

It was exactly the kind of response he’d expected from her, but hearing it said out loud only made the pressure worse. As the one giving the gift, it made him second-guess whether his choice could really live up to that trust.

“But it’s true,” Mahiru insisted. “Just knowing that you put thought into it with me in mind makes me happy.”

“Yeah, but that just raises the bar higher, you know? If I hand you something random, it’s going to seem like that’s what came out of all that thinking.”

“Would you give me something random?”

“Of course not. I’ve seriously been thinking about what would make you happy, and I want to give you a proper gift that shows that.”

Amane knew that Mahiru would likely treasure anything he gave her. But that was exactly why he put real thought into choosing something she would truly love for White Day.

The only problem was how ridiculously awkward it felt to actually say what he’d picked out loud.

“Uh…so, um…”

“Yes?”

“If you’re okay with it, I was thinking…maybe you could come by my part-time job on White Day.”

“…Huh?”

Mahiru froze, her entire body turning still. Though her expression remained composed, her pupils widened in pure surprise as she silently waited for him to finish.

“I mean, you’ve been wanting to see it for a while now, right? You kept putting it off for my sake, but I’ve gotten used to the job, and even the senior staff gave me their stamp of approval, so…I figured it’d be okay. I can’t exactly have the place reserved or stay with you the whole time, but…if you’re still okay with that—”

“Can I really!? Are you serious!?”

Mahiru came to life far quicker than he expected.

She squeezed his hand—not hard, but with enough energy to make her

excitement crystal clear. Her cheeks were flushed with joy, her eyes sparkling with anticipation as she leaned in close.

The calm, graceful smile she usually wore had vanished, replaced by a wide, almost childlike grin. The transformation was so sudden that Amane couldn't help but smile back. It wasn't out of surprise, but pure affection. She was so delighted, so completely overjoyed, that just looking at her lifted his spirits.

It was a bright, innocent smile that she never showed at school. And seeing it now, Amane knew without a doubt:

She's going to love it.

"You're really into this idea, huh?"

"Of course I am! I've been holding back this whole time, wanting to see how cool you look while you work."

"Whether I'll actually look cool is…up for debate."

"You will to me."

Mahiru's eyes locked onto his with a determined gleam, clearly unwilling to budge.

Amane gave a small shrug. "…I figured I'd show you a side of me you'd find cool. I know it might not be enough to repay the chocolate you worked so hard on, but…out of everything I could think of, this felt like the one thing that might actually make you happiest. Was I wrong?"

"How could it be? I've been looking forward to this."

"Awesome."

Even if Mahiru hadn't put it into words, her expression and movements said it all. Mahiru was glowing with joy. Her excitement was impossible to miss. She was already this excited just from the invitation. He couldn't imagine how she'd react when she actually visited the café.

Still, knowing Mahiru, she wouldn't lose her composure in public. She was too poised for that. What she felt on the inside, though, was another matter entirely.

She looked so visibly delighted she might start humming at any moment. Her expectations were so high that Amane felt just a touch overwhelmed. But her excitement also gave him a gentle boost to meet those hopes of hers head-on.

For now, all he wanted was to see her happy.

"I've arranged to finish work early on White Day. I'll show you I'm actually doing my job properly to put your mind at ease. After that, I thought we could maybe take a little detour."

"A detour…?"

"There are a few shops near my workplace that sell kitchenware, dishes, even specialty foods. I thought we could browse them together. You mentioned wanting to replace your cutting board, right? We could pick one out. I know it's not exactly the most romantic thing…sorry."

A new bakery had opened nearby after New Year's, offering fresh bread in the early morning. On their days off, Amane and Mahiru sometimes went out together to grab breakfast or pick up something for lunch when they were too busy to pack bentos.

While both of them generally preferred rice for breakfast, they enjoyed bread just as much. And with the bakery so close, fresh loaves had become a more frequent part of their mornings.

Sometimes, they'd buy a whole loaf, which was where the cutting board came in. But not long ago, Amane had made a serious blunder. He'd accidentally carved a deep scratch into the cutting board Mahiru had brought from her apartment. It wasn't the kind of thing that happened through normal use, and while the board was still technically functional, the damage had clearly dampened her mood.

He'd apologized over and over and even considered surprising her with a new one. But since it was something they both used often, he figured it made more sense to choose one they'd both like together.

"Is it too lacking for a gift?"

Amane had been worried it might come off as too mundane for a White Day gift, like it lacked the charm or sentiment that such a day called for. But as soon as Mahiru softly shook her head, her flaxen hair swaying with the motion, all his uncertainty faded away.

"It's more than enough… I'm so happy I can't stop smiling," Mahiru beamed.

"I wasn't sure if it really counted as a proper gift. It just felt like another part of our everyday routine… I didn't know if that would be enough."

“It’s that everyday life with you that I treasure most. And besides, you came up with the idea because you thought it would make me happy, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. It made me a little nervous. Not because I didn’t want you to come to my workplace, but because I wasn’t sure it’d be good enough. You put so much effort into the chocolates you made for me, and I wanted my White Day gift to feel just as meaningful.”

“Then you don’t need to worry at all. Just hearing your idea makes my heart flutter.”

“Yeah, I can tell by how excited you are.”

Mahiru was practically glowing, her happiness so radiant it felt like flowers or musical notes might start floating around her at any second. There wasn’t even a hint of doubt in her joy. And for Amane, that was all the reassurance he needed.

“I really am sorry for keeping you waiting this long.”

“I’ve been waiting forever, you know? …But I get it. I understand how you feel, so I can’t blame you. If I were in your shoes, I’d want to look prepared too. When I see you, I want to present my best self, Amane-kun.”

It was just part of who she was—composed and remarkably self-disciplined.

Even around Amane, Mahiru rarely let herself look scruffy. She always maintained a tidy appearance, good posture, and a collected presence. Amane, on the other hand, had no issue lounging around, letting his guard down completely when he was with someone he trusted.

Part of Mahiru’s formality came from being in someone else’s home, but still, Amane sometimes felt a tad bit disappointed. He wouldn’t have minded catching a glimpse of a more casual, even slightly messy Mahiru now and then.

I wonder if I’ll get to see a messier side of her once we start living together…

Just imagining it made him look forward to the future.

“You know, you’re still adorable even with wrinkled clothes and bedhead. Actually, *really* adorable,” he said.

“…Looks like I’ll have to start waking up earlier than you. It’s fifty-fifty

right now."

"What? No way, don't. That's one of my little joys… If anything, I've gotta come up with a plan to keep you fast asleep longer."

"Don't plot schemes like that. Geez."

Those rare, fleeting moments when Mahiru let her guard down, looking completely relaxed and defenseless, were irresistibly endearing. The thought of seeing less of that side of her genuinely stung.

Fueled by that very real concern, Amane started seriously contemplating ways to make it happen more often. Catching on, Mahiru blushed and began lightly smacking his thigh with her free hand in mock protest, each tap making a soft *pat-pat* sound against his leg.

"Anyway, um…I can't exactly give you special treatment or anything, but I already talked it over with the people at work. So…look forward to it, okay? Not too much, though. Just a little bit."

"…Telling me that now only makes me feel *more* jittery, you know."

Judging by her reaction, Amane's instincts had been spot-on. He was glad he'd waited until after exams to tell her. As Mahiru grew visibly fidgety, he reached out and gently rubbed her back, hoping to ease her nerves.

"Sorry. I just thought it was something I should say properly. And I wanted to make sure our schedules lined up."

"It's not a problem at all. I'm really excited."

"…You wanna see it that badly, huh?"

"Of course. I can't wait," Mahiru said, beaming. Her voice carried an unmistakable sincerity that left no room for doubt.

Hearing it, Amane felt the warmth of being genuinely cared for, and just a tiny flicker of worry that maybe, just maybe, her expectations were a little *too* high.

"By the way, are pictures allowed?" Mahiru asked.

"…I'll ask the owner."

The café did technically allow photos of the interior and food, but taking pictures of the staff was strictly prohibited.

While Amane could technically give personal permission, it might set a bad precedent if other customers saw it happening. It was safer to leave

that kind of decision to Fumika. If taking photos inside turned out to be a no-go, he figured he could at least ask her to sneak in a couple of behind-the-scenes shots of him in uniform. That seemed like the more practical option.

"You're not against me taking pictures?"

"I kept you waiting long enough, and, well…if it brings you even a little happiness, then I don't really mind…"

"Hehe, I'll be looking forward to it. But I won't mind if it's not allowed."

If it meant making her day even just a little brighter, Amane had no intention of turning her down. As long as it was within reason, he wanted to grant whatever wishes he could.

I'll ask about it next time I'm there.

Of course, he was fully expecting to get teased the moment Mahiru's name came up.

"Oh, right—um, on White Day, would it be okay if I change my clothes first?" Mahiru asked.

"Sure, but…is something up?"

"Not exactly. I just want to make sure I look presentable when visiting your workplace."

"You don't have to go that far… You're just coming as a customer, aren't you?"

"It's a matter of how *I* feel! And also, um…your coworkers will be there too, won't they?"

"Yeah, they will."

"Then I have to greet them properly. And…I want to dress up so you wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with me."

The café was fully staffed, so there were always other employees around. Amane hadn't met everyone who worked the early weekday shifts, but he was on good terms with most of the staff.

He'd already mentioned, in passing, that he had a girlfriend. So once he introduced Mahiru in person, it didn't take a genius to figure out how that was going to go.

"Ah, so this *is his girlfriend."* Amane could already hear that line in his head.

“Since I want you to be able to proudly introduce me as your girlfriend, I need to dress appropriately. And besides, if we go out afterward, I’d like to look nice for that too.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to bring a change of clothes too. If you’re going to get all dressed up, I can’t be standing next to you still in my uniform.”

If that was what Mahiru wanted, there was no reason to stop her. And now that he thought about it, walking around town in his work uniform wasn’t the most flattering look. Changing into something casual sounded like the right call.

Judging by her tone, it was easy to picture Mahiru putting real effort into how she dressed that day. And if that was the case, it only felt right for Amane to meet her halfway. It would make things more comfortable for both of them.

Mahiru always liked seeing him dressed nicely anyway. Maybe this could be a small bonus to his White Day gift to her.

I’ll pick an outfit out of the closet later.

As Amane mentally mapped out their White Day plans, Mahiru gave him a soft, demure smile.

“…It’s like a date,” she said.

“I mean, it basically *is* one. I just feel bad we probably won’t get to spend much time out.”

Strictly speaking, it was a date. But between the café and a kitchenware store, it wasn’t exactly the kind of outing that screamed romance. Itsuki or Chitose would definitely give him a hard time for that.

“Spending the whole day together would be lovely, but what matters more is the quality of the time we share. Just being with you, Amane-kun, is more than enough for me.”

“That’s so sweet of you, Mahiru… But honestly, I still want to spend more time with you.”

“In that case, invite me out on another date sometime soon. Going out together from home is nice, but there’s something charming about meeting up and waiting for each other, too.”

Lately, with part-time work and exam prep, they hadn’t had many chances to go out alone together. But now that exams were over and his

White Day plans were, more or less, set, things were finally starting to open up again.

He did plan to take on some shifts during spring break, but he wasn't about to fill his entire schedule. Setting aside a whole day to spend with Mahiru—just the two of them—was something Amane very much wanted to do.

"Then let's go out on a day I'm not working. Honestly, I still feel like I owe you way more for White Day."

"I don't think you do at all…but I'd love that. I can't wait."

"Yeah… Me too. First, though, I've gotta make sure I actually look the part."

"I'll be expecting great things," she said with a soft giggle.

Seeing how genuinely excited Mahiru was, Amane made a quiet promise to himself: he'd give it everything he had on White Day.

He gave her hand another gentle squeeze, warmer now than it had been just moments ago.

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The next day during lunch break, Amane made his way to the stairwell that led to the school rooftop, where Souji was supposed to be. He needed to talk to him about something work-related. But when he arrived, he wasn't the only one there—Ayaka was with him.

She sometimes spent lunch with the other girls, but it looked like today she'd chosen to eat with Souji. The two of them had even laid out a small picnic blanket, their lunches arranged neatly over it.

Since Ayaka was here too, Amane figured he might as well bring up his White Day plans while talking to Souji about work. The moment he did, Ayaka clapped her hands together, her face lighting up with a bright, sunny smile.

"Oh wow, so you're *finally* bringing Shiina-san to the café, huh?"

"I know I've kept her waiting."

"Hehe, she's been so fidgety about it lately. Every now and then, she'd

glance over at me looking all envious."

"Envious? You haven't come in on any of my shifts, though…"

He had specifically told Itsuki and Chitose to stay away from the café as he wasn't too keen on them seeing him in a role he still wasn't fully used to. But Ayaka was different. She was the one who had introduced him to the job in the first place, so he hadn't felt the need to say anything. If she happened to see him at work, so be it.

Still, she'd never once dropped by during his shifts.

Amane's confusion must have been written all over his face, because Ayaka gave him a wry smile and said, "Well, I'd feel kind of bad if I saw you working before Shiina-san did."

Ayaka then clarified, "I don't go when you're working, but I'd stop by as a regular customer when it was just Sou-chan. I think that's what Shiina-san was a little jealous about."

"You only showed up when Itomaki-san wasn't around, either."

Though Ayaka had held back out of consideration for Mahiru, that wasn't the only reason. It was more like a convenient excuse.

"That's because Auntie dotes on me way too much when I'm there. I just want to watch Sou-chan work, but when the owner herself starts fussing over me, I have no idea what to do."

She didn't dislike Fumika, but apparently, Ayaka wasn't a fan of being spoiled. Because of that, she tended to keep her visits to a minimum.

"You sure you come to see *me* and not my *muscles*?" Souji asked, eyebrow raised.

"Hmm…both?"

"Talk about greedy..."

"Well, I *do* want to look at you, Sou-chan. So does it really matter which part I'm focused on?"

"…Can't argue with that, but still."

Ayaka flashed a big, mischievous smile up at him. And just like that, Souji was left speechless, lips drawn into a tight, straight line as if struggling to keep any further comments from slipping out.

Kayano doesn't stand a chance when you challenge him head-on, huh, Amane discovered.

Souji was usually calm and composed, but it was clear now just how deeply he cared for Ayaka and that he had his own share of shy, vulnerable moments.

It was oddly charming and a little funny. Amane felt like he'd just uncovered a new side of his coworker.

"Thanks for the treat," he said with a teasing grin.

"Fujimiya…" Souji muttered, a quiet warning in his voice.

"Hey, let me have this. I want to know how it feels to be a spectator, too."

"Makes sense. Shiina-san always gets you blushing, doesn't she? She's got you completely wrapped around her finger. It's so sweet it hurts to watch."

"…Shush, Kido."

"'Kaaay~." Ayaka giggled, backing off without resistance but clearly amused. "I'll lose the upper hand if you side with Sou-chan."

Watching how easily she let up, Amane figured Souji would probably get his revenge for all the teasing later. Honestly, he was half-tempted to help out when the time came.

For now, though, he let it slide and took a seat at the edge of the picnic blanket, prompted by Ayaka's cheerful insistence.

"So, I checked the schedule, and Fujimiya, you're working on White Day, right? That should finally put Shiina-san at ease."

"Yeah… I've made her wait long enough."

Mahiru had done her best not to let it show, but Amane knew she'd been anxiously looking forward to that day. Ayaka had clearly noticed, too.

"That, sure," Souji added, "but I think more than anything, it'll ease her mind. Ayaka told me Shiina-san's been a little worried about you."

"Worried? Why?"

"Mmm, about you becoming a hot attraction at the café," Ayaka said, offering a wry smile. "Shiina-san was pretty anxious about it."

"Yeah, she mentioned that before. But honestly, the only real attention I've gotten is from a couple of older regulars. It was a madam and a monsieur who were half-joking about setting me up with their grandkids."

They'd talked before about how the only customers who ever struck up

casual conversations with Amane were longtime regulars, elderly men and women three times his age. Man or woman didn't matter. They were well-meaning elders with plenty of life behind them. The flirting or romantic interest that Mahiru might be concerned about never happened.

Of course, Amane knew Mahiru still worried. Which was why, at work, he kept things strictly professional, never going beyond what was expected of a café employee. Besides, during his usual shifts, young women didn't even show up that often.

Still, he understood. Some anxieties weren't easily talked away, no matter how unfounded. That was why he always made sure to show, in both words and actions, that Mahiru had nothing to worry about.

"Granted, I haven't seen it for myself, but…I can totally picture it, you know?" Ayaka said thoughtfully. "You seem like the type who'd be popular with mature, worldly women who've seen their share of life."

"Honestly, I don't even know why they start conversations with me," Amane replied, still genuinely puzzled.

"Isn't it because you seem super sincere?" Ayaka said. "You aren't flashy or shallow, and you've become a lot more approachable lately. Like a dependable, honest young man."

"I could say the same about Miyamoto-san, though."

Oohashi might tease him by calling him a playboy, but in truth, despite his breezy looks, Miyamoto carried himself with a calm, steady composure. He looked mature in a way that didn't quite match his outwardly casual appearance.

"Someone like Miyamoto-san, who strikes that balance between being half-serious and half-playful, tends to be popular with younger people too," Ayaka said. "He's friendly and dependable…the kind of guy who just naturally draws people of any age or gender in."

"It kinda feels like the regulars are all cheering him on from the sidelines."

"Ahh…" Amane understood.

Has Miyamoto even realized the regulars picked up on the fact that he's got a thing for Oohashi-san? he thought. *If not… maybe that's for the best.*

"And then there's Sou-chan," Ayaka continued, smiling. "With that stiff

expression and sturdy build, people tend to find him a little intimidating at first. *I* think he's cute, though."

"Not exactly thrilled to hear that," Souji muttered.

"Okay, I'll call you *cool-cute* then."

"…Do whatever you want."

"You're fine with that, Kayano…?"

It wasn't so much that Souji liked it or agreed with her. It was more like he just let Ayaka say whatever she pleased. But the fact that he didn't argue or push back against her final verdict made it obvious how soft he was when it came to her.

Amane had always thought of Souji as a cool, composed guy, rarely emotional. But in front of Ayaka, that cool exterior melted away almost effortlessly.

"Anyway," Ayaka went on, "sounds like Shiina-san's been a little anxious about you being unexpectedly popular with a certain crowd, and she really wanted to see it for herself to put her worries to rest."

"Mahiru wouldn't suspect me of cheating, though. Not even a little."

"Huh? *You*? Cheating? As if."

"Maybe when pigs fly."

They're in perfect sync. Does that mean they trust me? Amane wasn't sure.

"…I appreciate the trust, but does that not just mean I'm an open book?"

"Mm-hmm. You're practically broadcasting your love for her at this point," Ayaka said.

"Don't forget," Souji added, "there's no way Shiina-san would ever doubt you when it's so obvious how hard you're working to do something for her."

"Thank…you."

That was supposed to be a compliment…right? Amane's cheek twitched.

Ayaka, clearly meaning no harm, chimed in brightly, "You guys are bursting with love."

That only made him want to shout, *"Get it together, me! At least try to hide it, will you!?"*

Maybe I need to be more mindful of how I act with Mahiru in public.

Judging from what they were saying, his face was doing a terrible job of hiding how he felt.

He reached up and touched his cheek. *I can't let myself look all sappy in front of everyone. I've gotta be careful.*

Ayaka giggled, guessing exactly what was running through his head.

"Can't wait to see Shiina-san turn all sweet and weak-kneed!"

"Sorry, but that's for *my* eyes only."

"Hmph, fair enough. Then I pray I'll see a *lovey-dovey* Fujimiya-kun and a *totally smitten* Shiina-san up close sometime soon!"

"Is your view of us not a little skewed…?"

"Isn't that how all your close friends see you guys? You should try asking Akazawa-kun or Chi-chan."

"…No thanks. They'd probably agree with you."

Actually, *probably* was being generous—they almost definitely would. He had just recently opened up to Itsuki about his feelings for Mahiru, after all, so there was no doubt he'd get sincere approval on top of relentless teasing in return.

Amane could already picture it: that awkward, twitchy smile he'd wear while enduring all their ribbing.

"So I was right, wasn't I? *Knew it*." Ayaka laughed, clearly enjoying every second.

Peeved, Amane shot her a semi-pointed glare, only for her to laugh even harder in response.

Chapter 9

White Day and the Grand Reveal

White Day had arrived, and the mood was a lot more relaxed compared to the buzz of Valentine's.

Some guys were still caught in that sweet-and-sour tension. Others, who hadn't gotten anything on Valentine's, pretended they had no clue what White Day even was and brought no gifts for the girls. *"White Day? That some tasty new snack or something?"* they joked, brushing it off like it meant nothing. A few looked downright bitter about the whole thing, while others wore the serene, unbothered expression of someone who'd reached full spiritual enlightenment.

In Amane's class, things were surprisingly upbeat and laid-back, thanks to a few girls who had passed out obligatory chocolates to everyone back on Valentine's Day.

They'd made it clear that nobody was expected to return the favor, so not every guy showed up with a gift. Still, judging by all the bags and packages scattered around, most of the guys had brought something back out of courtesy.

Amane had received his fair share of friendship and obligatory chocolates, so he'd come prepared, too. He'd brought along some sweets in return. They were carefully chosen, or at least as carefully as his somewhat foggy memory would allow. Over the past year, he'd made mental notes of each girl's preferences from passing conversations and did his best to match his gifts accordingly.

He'd gone with some baked goods that were on the pricier side, as consumables were a safe, thoughtful choice. After all, if the gift didn't land right, a trinket would be hard to dispose of.

“Morning. Thank you for the Valentine’s Day gift. This is a little something in return. Just to be safe, you’re not allergic to anything, right?”

After mulling over the timing, Amane had decided it was best to hand out the return gifts before class started. If he waited until after school, someone might slip out before he got the chance. Mahiru didn’t mind, and she’d seen him off with a soft, encouraging smile.

Hibiya had just arrived at class. She was carrying a paper bag filled with a few return gifts. Just to be sure, Amane asked her about any allergies. She seemed confused at first that Amane spoke out to her, but her face immediately lit up the moment she heard the words “Valentine's Day.”

“Nope, no allergies!” she chirped. “And wow, thanks! This’s way more than I expected, especially for a chocolate wafer.”

“No, really, I should be the one thanking you.”

Even if it had been obligatory, he appreciated the kindness behind it. He’d happily eaten it during one of his study sessions.

When he handed her the neatly wrapped pack of butter cookies, she beamed. “Sweet! I’m totally making this my snack for today.”

Her genuine delight made Amane feel unexpectedly relieved.

His eyes drifted over to Konishi, who had just arrived alongside Hibiya. Their gazes met, and she greeted him with a gentle smile.

To Amane, at least, it didn’t seem forced. And the fact that he felt no discomfort or guilt looking at her was reassuring.

“Thanks for the chocolate too, Konishi. I really enjoyed it.”

“I’m glad you did.”

Her reply was smooth, without hesitation or awkwardness. She spoke in the same calm, steady tone she always had, and Amane answered her just as naturally as if nothing had happened between them.

“Here, this is for you.” Amane extended a hand to Konishi. “Assuming you aren’t allergic.”

“I don’t, so no worries. Thank you so much.”

“I got something from you, so I figured I should return the favor. I can at least guarantee it tastes good.”

“If you recommend it, Fujimiya-kun, then I look forward to it. I can’t wait to try it later.”

Her modest smile was the same one she always wore in class. Amane responded with a friendly smile of his own, the kind he'd offer any classmate, and passed the gift into her hands.

He vaguely recalled overhearing a conversation among the girls a while back where they'd talked about their love for matcha snacks. Based on that, he'd chosen a set of matcha sablés with varying levels of richness, which was a treat he personally enjoyed from time to time.

He'd asked the shop to wrap it, and while the packaging had been done neatly, the semi-transparent paper still gave a peek at what was inside.

The moment Konishi caught sight of it, her eyes went wide with surprise.

She looked his way, but there was no sadness or moistness in her eyes—just surprise.

Then, just as quickly, that surprise gave way to a bright, genuine smile. Konishi beamed. "Thanks, I love matcha. I'll enjoy every bite."

With that, she turned and walked off, clearly in higher spirits than before.

As he watched her go, Amane felt the last remnants of a long-held, but now needless, weight lift from his chest. He exhaled softly and made his way back to where Mahiru was waiting.

She trusted him without question. And from what he could see, there wasn't the slightest trace of doubt in her expression.

It felt like both the feelings Konishi had once held for him and the guilt Amane had carried in return had been gently put to rest. Perhaps knowing this, Mahiru welcomed him back with her usual sweet smile.

"All done handing everything out?" she asked.

"Not quite," Amane said. "Some people haven't shown up yet. I'll give them theirs later. Kido and Chitose aren't here yet either."

"Now that you mention it…you're right. They're usually here by now."

They turned toward the classroom door. Right on cue, Itsuki walked in.

He'd mentioned getting chocolates from a few girls, and sure enough, he was carrying a bag that probably held his return gifts. But today, Chitose wasn't with him.

"Mornin'. You two are here early," Itsuki said as he stepped in.

“Good morning,” Mahiru replied with a gentle smile. “I suppose we did get here a little earlier than usual today.”

“Morning. Where’s Chitose?”

“We walked to the shoe lockers together, but the moment we got here, she started whining about her hands being freezing and bolted off to grab something warm from a vending machine. I had stuff to hand out, so I told her I’d go on ahead. She said she was in the mood for a café au lait, so I’m guessing she went to the one near the cafeteria.”

Their school had vending machines scattered all over campus, but the café au lait Chitose had recently gotten hooked on was only sold in a single machine inconveniently far from their classroom.

If there was one nearby, she could’ve just gone to that one and be done with it. Going to the nearest one would take a bit more time.

I can’t believe she’s going out of her way in this cold, Amane thought, both amused and a little impressed by her dedication.

He glanced over at Itsuki, whose nose was still red from the cold. Itsuki thought nothing of Amane’s gaze and turned his attention to Mahiru.

“Ah, Shiina-san, Shiina-san! Got a sec?”

“Is something the matter?”

“C’mere, c’mere.”

For some reason, Itsuki was waving Mahiru over, motioning toward a corner of the classroom specifically away from Amane. Though a little puzzled, Mahiru didn’t seem suspicious and followed him without hesitation.

It was probably White Day-related—most likely his return gift. Still, the fact that Itsuki had deliberately pulled her aside, out of earshot, made it clear whatever he was giving her wasn’t something he wanted Amane to see or hear.

What the hell is he up to…?

Not wanting to outright eavesdrop, Amane kept a quiet eye on them from a distance. Itsuki had a warm, easy smile as he pulled a small package from his paper bag and handed it to Mahiru. It was clearly a White Day gift.

But just giving her something didn’t really warrant dragging her away like that. Amane found that point a bit odd.

Then he saw Itsuki pull out his phone.

Mahiru looked genuinely pleased as she accepted the gift, but there was a flicker of suspicion in her eyes as she glanced at Itsuki. Not that it fazed him. He just kept wearing that suspiciously innocent smile.

Even from across the room, that smile was enough to set off alarm bells in Amane's head.

"...had to…make sure he wo—…hear this, okay…? I thought you'd wanna know this, Shiina-san…and I figured…would make you happy."

Amane could only catch fragments of what Itsuki was saying. He was speaking too softly and was too far away for him to make out the full conversation. But even those scattered words made it obvious that whatever Itsuki was doing, he had planned it carefully and intentionally.

After talking to Mahiru, Itsuki slid his phone back into his pocket and casually turned his head in Amane's direction. Fully aware he was being watched, Itsuki gave him a blindingly smug wink, followed by a cheeky little wave.

Amane was embarrassed that Itsuki hadn't just expected him to be suspicious; he'd counted on it. He waited patiently for Mahiru to return, while Itsuki went to hand out gifts to the other girls instead of going up to Amane.

Mahiru came back a little quicker than usual. When Amane glanced at her, she wore a perfectly ordinary smile. She looked like someone who'd simply received a thoughtful gift and appreciated it—no more, no less. Whatever had gone on with Itsuki, she wasn't showing it on her face.

"...Was it his White Day gift?"

"Yes. He gave me these adorable animal-shaped icing cookies."

"Figures he'd pick something right up your alley."

Without needing to be asked, Mahiru held the gift out toward him so he could take a look.

Inside the clear plastic wrapping were intricately shaped cookies, each modeled after a different animal and complete with delicate icing details. The tiny round eyes, expressive little faces, and charming patterns captured each animal's features perfectly.

Cute treats were usually on the sweeter side thanks to the icing, but

considering Mahiru's fondness for both cute things and sweet flavors, they were probably just right up her alley.

"I do like them, but…um, I'm a bit torn."

"They're too cute to eat, right?"

"Hehe, you know me too well."

Back when they'd visited a cat café, Mahiru had hesitated to drink her latte because the foam art was too cute to ruin. Just as he'd expected, Mahiru was showing the same concern now.

The cookies in her hands were decorated with such care and charm that even Amane would've felt a little bad about biting into one. For someone like Mahiru, it probably felt downright sinful. Watching her hesitate over whether to eat them warmed his heart. He felt a little sorry for her, but couldn't help but smile.

"The better made they are, the harder it is to actually eat them," Amane said with a soft chuckle.

"But I have to eat them before they go bad… Uuuu…" Mahiru let out a tiny groan, clearly distressed.

"Well, if you love them that much, I'm sure Itsuki would be thrilled. He's got good instincts for this kind of thing."

Itsuki could've easily gone the generic route, but instead, he'd picked something that matched Mahiru's tastes perfectly. And judging by the way she kept admiring the cookies, he'd hit the mark. Even if part of her grieved the idea of biting into something so adorable.

Watching her marvel over them with such innocent delight brought a warm smile to Amane's face. It was a simple moment, but one that made him feel warm and fuzzy, as if gently embraced by a warm veil of happiness.

"…So, setting that aside," he began gently, "didn't Itsuki whisper something else to you, too?"

He asked the question as her boyfriend. He asked calmly, making it clear through his tone and expression that she didn't have to answer if she didn't want to, and that he wouldn't press.

Even so, Mahiru's shoulders gave a sudden, unmistakable twitch.

"No, he…"

"—didn't?"

"…I promise, I haven't betrayed you or anything like that. It's nothing like that at all."

"Yeah, I know."

Amane didn't doubt her even for a second. He knew Mahiru too well. If there was one thing he could say with absolute certainty, it was that she would never betray him.

Maybe the version of her that the world saw, the polished, untouchable "Angel," might've seemed like someone who could keep secrets. But the real Mahiru, the one only he knew, wasn't like that. She couldn't hide things from him, even if she wanted to. She was far too sincere and honest. And even if in the one-in-a-million chance that her feelings ever changed, she'd tell him this to his face.

So, no, he wasn't asking because he was suspicious of her.

He just wanted to know if Itsuki had said anything strange or slipped her something questionable under the guise of friendly advice or a gift.

"I-It was, um, something he thought I'd personally enjoy!"

"Ah, got it. A photo or something then, huh? If that's all, then by all means."

The second she blurted out *"something I'd personally enjoy,"* the answer might as well have been shoved in his face. Amane nodded, deciding to leave it at that.

"I feel like you understand me a little *too* well sometimes…" Mahiru murmured.

"Well, if the goal was to make you smile, that sounds exactly like the kind of thing Itsuki would come up with."

Mahiru never half-hearted anything when it came to her friends. Even if the chocolate she gave Itsuki wasn't as elaborate as the ones she made for Amane, it had still been thoughtfully prepared and delicious.

And knowing how Itsuki was principled in the weirdest ways, he'd probably felt like just giving a return gift wasn't enough to balance the scales. Add to that his habit of acting like a mischievous gremlin specifically toward Amane, and it wasn't hard to guess that the extra gesture had been part genuine goodwill and part good-natured trolling.

"…Aren't you curious what it was?"

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t. But I don’t feel the need to check. It’s something personal, and I trust you both.”

Even as a couple, there were lines that shouldn’t be crossed. No matter how close they were, personal space mattered. Snooping around just to satisfy curiosity wasn’t something Amane believed in, especially not with someone he loved.

Besides, whatever it was, the simple fact that it came from Itsuki and was meant for Mahiru told him it wasn’t anything he needed to worry about. That was enough.

At his relaxed, easygoing answer, Mahiru let out a soft, thoughtful hum. She looked just a little conflicted.

“…I’m really happy you trust me this much,” Mahiru said softly. “And, um…it’s not like it’s some big secret or anything. What he showed me was, well…a voice recording.”

“A voice recording?”

“He said I should listen to it whenever I feel lonely without you…”

She fidgeted slightly, shrinking into herself, her gaze flitting away as her cheeks turned pink. She couldn’t bring herself to meet his eyes.

Amane remembered the time she’d fallen asleep while on the phone with him. That had been the first sign that she was especially fond of his voice. Sometimes, she’d even ask to hear it before bed.

Itsuki must’ve learned of that somehow and decided to record Amane’s voice as a bonus with his gift. Or more likely, as the real gift altogether.

A heads-up would’ve been nice…

“…You know,” Amane said with a sigh, “if you’d just asked, I would’ve recorded something for you myself.”

“Really!?”

“Whoa, you’re *really* excited. I can’t deny just how spot-on Itsuki’s idea was.”

“U-um, I…I mean…”

It was true Amane had been working part-time more often lately, leaving her on her own more than usual. If hearing his voice helped her feel a little less lonely, he didn’t mind even if it was a little embarrassing. At the very least, he knew how to say the things she wanted to hear.

“Well, anyway…I doubt it’s anything shady. Do whatever you want with it.”

“...You’re okay with me keeping it?”

“I can’t imagine Itsuki would give you anything weird. I trust him. And besides, it’s not my place to tell you what to do with a gift. It was given to you, so if you want to keep it, then you should.”

That said, Amane fully intended to give Itsuki a well-earned smack on the back later.

“If it helps you even a little, I think that’d make both me and Itsuki happy. He’d probably consider that mission accomplished.”

“Amane-kun…”

“No fliiiiirting! Save the lovey-dovey stuff for when you’re *alone*!”

Just as their eyes met and the atmosphere began to sweeten, an arm jabbed between them like a wedge. They both recognized the voice instantly. Turning to look, they found Chitose standing there, café au lait in one hand, nose red from the cold, and a look of dramatic disbelief written all over her face. She wasn’t even trying to hide her disbelief.

“Good morning, Chitose-san.”

“Morning! You two are as sweet as ever. It’s freezing outside, but watching you has me feeling all warm and fuzzy.”

“Morning. Or maybe it’s the *hot drink* you’ve got and how you’re standing in front of the *heater*,” Amane pointed out.

“Don’t be a wet blanket!”

“That’s what you get for trying to tease us.”

Chitose made it sound like he was the buzzkill here, but Amane had zero interest in being the butt of her teasing.

He shot her a look that clearly said *“Cut it out,”* but Chitose’s trademark mischievous grin stayed firmly in place.

“You know I didn’t *have* to stop you guys, right? It would’ve been just as entertaining to watch your face turn bright pink when you fiiinally realized people were around.”

The second she said it, it hit him. They were still in the classroom. And while first period hadn’t started yet, a decent number of students had already arrived. Amane felt his cheeks heat up, and he awkwardly moved

his lips in an attempt to hide it.

"Made you blush a bit, did I?"

"Zip it."

Of course Chitose had noticed. And her smug little laugh only made it worse. Amane cleared his throat, trying to regain some composure, then reached into his paper bag and pulled out a neatly ribbon-tied, square tin, about fifteen centimeters across.

"Here. Your return gift."

"Ooh, thank you kindly. How very proper of you. So, what's inside?"

"I'd love to say 'wait and see,' but I don't want to get your hopes up too high. It's the White Day limited-edition cookie tin from that place you like. This year's theme is spices, apparently."

Whether Amane was happy to receive Chitose's chocolate or not, she had clearly put a lot of time and effort into it. So, after chatting it over with Itsuki, Amane had taken the time to choose a return gift he felt suited her.

After knowing her for almost two years, Amane learned that Chitose loved spicy food, had a serious sweet tooth, and enjoyed flavors that packed a little punch. Straight-up hot snacks were out of the question for White Day, but something with a bold, distinctive taste felt just right for her.

The tin was filled with cookies richly infused with spices like cinnamon, clove, cardamom, and ginger. It was a bold mix that could easily divide opinions depending on taste.

Amane had checked with Mahiru beforehand, and she'd confirmed that Chitose was definitely into spiced flavors. Judging by the way her face lit up the moment she saw the tin, it was safe to say he'd nailed it.

"Whoa, these are awesome. I *love* spices!" Chitose exclaimed.

"You *did* try to chew a cinnamon stick," Mahiru mentioned.

"What were you thinking…? That stuff's literally tree bark…"

Amane usually just used the powdered version, but ever since he started cooking seriously, Mahiru had taught him that cinnamon was actually made by drying the bark of a certain kind of evergreen from the laurel family. He still remembered how weirdly impressed he'd been at the time.

People really will eat anything, huh...

“I thought it might be good! Wasn’t the biggest fan of the texture, though.”

“Obviously not. Wait—so you *actually* bit into one…?”

“Life’s about trying new things!”

“I admire the adventurous spirit, but maybe draw the line somewhere.”

“Too much cinnamon can affect your liver, and some spices aren’t meant to be eaten in large amounts,” Mahiru added gently. “So please be careful, okay? Or rather, just keep things in moderation.”

“All riiight, Maaama.”

“*Ma—!?* Hey…”

Mahiru gently and calmly scolded her without getting angry. Chitose responded with a compliant yet teasing reply, which made Mahiru sigh with embarrassment and disbelief.

Her nurturing side always seemed to come out around Chitose, and that was likely the very reason Chitose saw her as a “mom” figure. It wasn’t hard to imagine that was what inspired her little jab.

“Hmph.” Mahiru huffed, puffing out her cheeks.

Chitose, of course, just laughed.

“Come to think of it, where’s Yuu-chan? Is he…oh, right, he’s not back yet. He started his White Day rounds.”

At the mention of his name, Amane glanced around the classroom, but Yuuta was nowhere in sight.

Yuuta usually showed up early on days when he didn’t have club activities. And since Amane knew he was free today, his absence was a bit out of the ordinary…until he remembered what day it was.

Right…no wonder he’s not back yet.

Yuuta had gotten an absurd number of chocolates, after all.

The third-years had already graduated, so at least he didn’t have to worry about returning anything to them. But even just making it up to the first and second-year girls was a tall enough order. Trying to cram it all into the short window after school probably wasn’t realistic. Some girls might’ve already left by then, and not everyone was guaranteed to hang around just to receive a gift. So it made sense that he’d gone to hand them out wherever he could before coming to class.

“It’s impressive how seriously he takes giving all the girls a return gift. I can’t believe he managed to bring all the gifts to school. Must’ve been a nightmare to carry.”

Knowing Yuuta, he’d probably given everyone the same thing. He wasn’t the type to play favorites. Still, with the sheer number of gifts he had to return, even if it was just a single cookie per person, hauling that much around couldn’t have been easy. Amane was a little worried about how much stuff Yuuta would be juggling by the time he finally made it to class.

“He tries his best, doesn’t he? Maybe that thoughtfulness and diligence are the secret to his popularity,” Chitose wondered.

“It’s not some hidden trick or strategy,” Amane replied. “That’s just who he is. He’s always like that, and that’s why people like him.”

Every now and then, Amane would hear classmates brush off Yuuta’s popularity as just a byproduct of his looks. But he disagreed. If that were all there was to it, Yuuta wouldn’t be nearly as popular as he was.

Sure, even from Amane’s point of view, Yuuta was good-looking enough to land on the cover of a magazine. Pair that with his lean, athletic build from track and field, and it wasn’t hard to see why girls took notice. But what truly drew people to him was his character, and Amane was sure of it.

Since becoming friends with him, Amane had come to appreciate just how easy Yuuta was to be around. From everything Amane had seen, there wasn’t even a hint of two-facedness in him. Calm, thoughtful, and genuinely friendly, Yuuta treated everyone with warmth, never a trace of hostility or condescension.

Good looks only went so far. If someone was aggressive, standoffish, or just had a bad attitude, that charm wore off fast. They’d end up nothing more than eye candy. From what Amane could tell, most girls weren’t shallow about stuff like that.

In that sense, Yuuta’s lasting popularity meant his personality matched the image people had of him. And his thoughtfulness in return gifts to every girl one by one was one of many reasons people naturally gravitated toward him.

“So you look up to Yuu-chan, huh?” Chitose asked.

“Well, can you blame me? The guy’s practically flawless… There’s a lot

about him worth learning from."

Amane didn't want to be like Yuuta, nor did he think he could. But he genuinely admired him and wanted to learn from his example.

His composure, how he treated others with respect, his unwavering sincerity, and how he kept pushing forward even when things got tough. Yuuta had no shortage of traits worth emulating.

"I think the way you honestly praise people's strengths and learn from them is one of your best traits, Amane-kun," Mahiru said, smiling. "And I don't think you fall short of him at all when it comes to sincerity and thoughtfulness."

"Actually," Chitose chimed in, grinning, "since you pour all your feelings into just one girl, your love is even more intense for her. Y'know what I mean? You're, like, surprisingly super affectionate and devoted to your lover."

"Quit teasing me."

Amane glared at Chitose.

Maybe not Mahiru, but Chitose's definitely trying to mess with me, Amane thought.

But Chitose and Mahiru offered nothing but warm smiles. They looked at him with soft, pure eyes, as if they were watching something heartwarming.

"We're complimenting you, I swear!" Chitose insisted.

"Exactly, Amane-kun," Mahiru added.

"…Come on, guys, seriously?"

"Look at him! He's so flustered he can't even argue back."

"And now he's trying to play it cool by looking away. Amane-kun is so adorable when he's embarrassed."

Mahiru was definitely siding with Chitose right now. She might not have been teasing him outright, but she was absolutely fawning over him as his girlfriend. And somehow, that was even worse.

Suppressing a groan, Amane gave her a long, pointed look of mild betrayal.

"I'll make you regret this, Mahiru. Just you wait."

"Wait, *why me!?*"

Once we're back home after our date today, I'm gonna spoil her so thoroughly that she'll give in and melt into a puddle of goo.

"Aren't you a lucky girl?" Chitose looked at Mahiru. "Sounds like he's gonna *smother* you with love tonight. He really does love you, eh?"

"Chitose…" Amane glared.

"Eek! He's glaring at me!"

Despite her playful shriek, Chitose didn't look the least bit sorry. She flashed a wide smile at Mahiru.

"You'll pay for that later, Chitose," Amane warned, narrowing his eyes.

"Why're you talking like I owe you something?"

"Think about what you've done."

"He has a point, Chitose-san."

"*You* should think too, Mahiru."

"Uuu…"

Sure, Chitose had been the instigator, but Mahiru had joined in a little too eagerly to walk away blameless. It wasn't quite guilt by association, but Amane figured she deserved a little scolding too.

Mahiru had a habit of teasing him whenever she wanted to see different sides of him. That wasn't anything new. But Amane needed her to know that when she pushed too far, a little payback would be in store.

Mahiru's shoulders slumped, and Amane smiled. She thought he was genuinely upset with her. He reached out and brushed aside a soft lock of hair that had fallen across her cheek, gently tucking it behind her ear. Then he leaned in, close, his lips hovering just beside her now-exposed ear.

"Mahiru," Amane murmured, his voice low and deliberate, just soft enough that Chitose wouldn't hear. "Be ready when we get home."

The words hit their mark instantly.

Mahiru's head snapped up, her eyes wide, cheeks turning scarlet as she looked at him in a flustered panic.

Amane, of course, didn't follow up. He only gave her a slight, teasing smirk using the corner of his lips.

Her face was already burning. Her imagination had clearly gone into overdrive, conjuring up all kinds of scenarios for what might await her later. The funny part was, he hadn't even said anything specific. She was the

one getting carried away, spiraling from her own imagination.

Letting her stew in that anticipation all the way home…would be her punishment.

"Get a room, you two!" Chitose called out, her teasing grin aimed squarely at Mahiru, who was now so red she looked like a sun-dried tomato.

Amane shot Chitose a sharp look.

She flinched dramatically. "Eek, scary! Knock on wood, knock on wood!" she yelped, as if warding off some terrible omen.

Amane sighed. He then raised one hand in front of her and formed a tight circle with his thumb and middle finger to charge a flick.

Chitose instantly cried, *"Kyaaa!"* before darting off toward Itsuki, who had just finished handing out his gifts.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

Once classes ended, it was easy to spot which boys hadn't handed out their gifts yet. One by one, they hurriedly made their way to the girls they'd been waiting to approach. Yuuta, on the other hand, didn't seem the least bit tired. He smoothly slipped out of the classroom to deliver the rest of his chocolates. It was hard not to admire his vitality.

Amane, meanwhile, had already returned chocolates during break to Ayaka and the others who'd given him some on Valentine's, so he had no reason to stick around. He was heading straight to work.

"All right then, Mahiru. I'll see you later."

As agreed, Mahiru planned to stop by Amane's workplace after going home to change, so they were parting for now.

When he called out, Mahiru, who was still seated at her desk, lifted her head.

A soft blush lingered on her cheeks, probably a leftover reaction from what he'd told her earlier. But her eyes sparkled with anticipation, a clear sign of how much she was looking forward to seeing where he worked.

"Yes, I'll see you later. I can't wait."

“Go easy on me, all right?”

Mahiru couldn’t contain her excitement. And although she stood up with a light bounce in her step, every movement was still elegant and graceful, which showcased the poise Koyuki had instilled in her.

Amane gave her a sheepish smile as she slipped past him.

For a moment, he considered walking her to the school gate, but remembered what she’d said. Fashion takes time, and every second matters. So, she likely intended to head home as quickly as possible without running.

Well, Mahiru always gets a little fired up before going out. She’s picky about her hair and clothes, so…yeah, this tracks, Amane thought, realizing just how seriously she was taking the visit.

He grabbed the paper bag he’d packed earlier and headed to work. This bag wasn’t a return gift, just a change of clothes he’d brought so he could head straight to their date after work.

As he passed by the hallway window on the way to the shoe lockers, he caught his reflection and noticed himself absentmindedly adjusting his hair. The realization made him chuckle under his breath.

Looks like I’m excited in my own way.

Embarrassing as it was to admit, Amane felt more eager to make Mahiru happy, to prove he could handle his work properly…or at least he hoped. And of course, he was looking forward to their date.

I just hope I don’t let her down, he thought, remembering the bright, expectant look on her face. A soft smile tugged at his lips, and before he knew it, his pace had picked up as he made his way to work.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

It had taken until White Day, but Mahiru was finally coming to see where Amane worked.

That said, Amane still had to carry out his shift as usual. After a quick mental reset, he slipped into his usual composed, professional mindset and got to work.

"…So the big day's finally come, eh?"

"What are *you* getting all hyped up for, Miyamoto-san?"

Amane had asked for his advice, sure, but Miyamoto wasn't exactly involved. Amane couldn't fathom why he nodded along, looking so satisfied.

The café was busier than usual, and the ambient chatter nearly drowned out their whispers. Still, Amane caught what Miyamoto had said and couldn't resist calling him out on it.

"I've been wanting to meet your girlfriend, man. You're always keeping her under wraps."

"Well, I'm not one to show her off."

"You seem like the type who'd lock away whatever he loves in a treasure chest."

"…You're not wrong. But I'd still leave the lid open. Just because I care doesn't mean I want to take her freedom."

Amane's voice was quiet as he grabbed a tray and a cleaning cloth to bus a recently vacated table.

Miyamoto chuckled. "That's love, man."

Amane pressed his lips together and headed off to clean up.

It looked like the last customers hadn't been gone long, as no one had gotten around to clearing their table. Amane gathered up the empty plates and cups they'd left behind, then gave the surface a quick wipe with a cloth.

Maybe it was because of White Day, but there had definitely been more dessert orders than usual. This table had been no exception. Judging from the crumbs and leftover cream, they'd gone with a cake set. It wasn't just his imagination. A faint sweetness still hung in the air, blending subtly with the scent of coffee.

A glance at the wall clock told him he'd already been on the floor for quite a while.

Mahiru would be arriving soon.

That thought alone made it hard to stay composed, but with customers around, he couldn't afford to let it show.

Doing his best to keep a neutral expression, he passed Miyamoto on his way back with the cleared dishes. Miyamoto, just finishing up at the register, caught his eye and shot him a teasing grin only he could see.

“By the way, about what you said earlier…” Amane began.

“Hm?” Miyamoto tilted his head, a bit puzzled by the sudden shift.

Seizing the chance to return the earlier teasing, Amane leaned in slightly, his voice carrying a mischievous edge.

“What about you, Miyamoto-san? Would you rather keep *her* in the chest too?”

“Nah, she wouldn’t fit even if I tried. And she’s definitely not the type to stay put.”

“Ah…yeah.”

“Don’t agree that fast. It’s annoying.”

Knowing Oohashi, Amane could easily picture her grabbing life by the horns and dragging whoever she was with along for the ride. Quiet and reserved wasn’t in her vocabulary.

But more than that, something in Miyamoto’s words struck him. His feelings hadn’t been returned. Amane’s heart ached for him.

He hadn’t meant to look at Miyamoto with pity, but it seemed he’d caught on anyway.

“All right, scram, scram,” Miyamoto muttered, giving a lazy wave as if shooing away a crowd even though Amane was the only one there.

Amane smiled awkwardly and turned away, heading to the sink with the dishes in hand.

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Today, Amane was unusually attuned to every sound and movement around him.

Each time the café’s bell chimed, his eyes shot straight to the door. He was still doing his job, of course, but just for today, the staff allowed him to move around more freely until Mahiru arrived.

He couldn’t thank Fumika and the others enough for their kindness.

Ding-a-ling—the familiar chime rang out, and Amane’s head snapped toward the entrance before he even realized it.

“I’ll take this one,” he murmured, offering Oohashi a quick, apologetic

glance as she stepped forward to greet the customer.

Then, without waiting for a reply, he headed straight for the girl at the door.

It was technically spring, but the lingering chill in the air still bit through. The girl's cheeks and the tip of her nose were tinged pink from the cold, and when her eyes settled on the staff member approaching from the back of the shop, they widened in surprise.

"Welcome. Table for how many today?"

Amane's tone was professional, but his smile carried much more warmth than usual. Mahiru's already flushed cheeks deepened in color, and this time, it had nothing to do with the weather.

"O-one, please."

"Very well. We have counter and table seating available. Do you have a preference?"

"...Um, if it's all right, may I have a table seat?"

"Of course. Right this way, please."

Her hesitant reply brought a soft smile to his lips. He was a little surprised, and maybe even a bit proud, of how composed he felt. Calm and collected, he gently guided Mahiru into the café.

Luckily, there were still open tables, so he led her to one just as she'd requested. "Please feel free to use this basket for your bag," he said, waiting patiently as she settled in.

She looked a little flustered, clearly nervous, and it took effort not to let the grin tugging at his mouth show. Instead, he delicately placed the menu in front of her.

"Here is our menu. When you're ready to order, please ring the bell on the table and someone will come to assist you."

Since the café was privately owned by Fumika, the menu was fairly simple, but every item was thoughtfully prepared. Whatever Mahiru picked, he had no doubt it would suit her tastes.

As she turned her attention to the menu, Amane gave a slight bow and stepped away to fetch water and a hand towel. On his way past, he passed Miyamoto, who flashed him a knowing grin, which he chose to ignore.

He poured chilled water into a glass, set it beside a neatly wrapped towel on a tray, and headed back toward Mahiru's table.

"Here's your cold water and hand towel."

"Thank you very much. Um…may I place my order now?"

"Certainly. I'll take your order."

Amane offered her a gentle smile as she hesitantly prepared to speak. Mahiru's cheeks, which had just started to return to their normal color, flared red all over again.

Though he acted no differently, her reaction was striking. The way she looked at him, her eyes full of longing and admiration, made it obvious that the uniform had transformed him into a brand new man.

Earlier, when he'd stepped away, she hadn't been able to take her eyes off him. Just that small detail was enough to tell him he'd cleared the first hurdle.

So far, he was living up to her expectations.

“I’ll have the seasonal cake set…and for the drink, um, do you have a recommendation, Amane-ku— I mean, um, mister…waiter?”

Mahiru stumbled mid-sentence, nearly saying his name aloud before catching herself. She cast a quick glance up at him, eyes slightly wide. Unfazed, Amane kept his smile calm and kind, gesturing to the section of the menu that listed the drink options included with the set.

“It depends on your preferences, of course, but with the seasonal cake, I’d recommend our house blend. It has a wonderful balance of acidity and bitterness, which complements the cake nicely.”

“Then I’ll have the seasonal cake set with the house blend, please.”

“Just to confirm, one seasonal cake set with the house blend. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Please wait just a moment.”

He repeated the order as he neatly jotted it down on the pad, then gave her a warm, professional smile. “I’ll take the menu now,” he said, gently collecting it as he turned toward the kitchen.

He didn’t look back, but he could feel her eyes following him the whole way.

“Order in. One seasonal cake set and a house blend.”

“Got it,” came the laid-back reply from Minase, who was on kitchen duty today.

At the same time, Miyamoto returned, balancing a tray stacked with empty dishes. He must’ve gotten caught up chatting with one of the regulars again.

“That girl… She’s your girlfriend, right, Fujimiya?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

Miyamoto had probably figured it out from the way Amane had taken the lead in serving her. He must’ve caught a glimpse of Mahiru as he passed by and decided to ask, just to confirm. Amane gave a brief nod while he scanned the open tables to keep tabs on the flow of orders.

The café wasn’t especially busy at the moment, so it was easy to imagine one of the regulars pulling Miyamoto into a casual chat once they saw him with a bit of downtime. It was the kind of familiar, easygoing exchange that

could only happen in a calm, welcoming place like this.

…Once the regulars catch on, they're definitely going to tease me.

Amane had grown used to working here, and over time, he'd come to recognize most of the regulars by face, if not by name. And now, it felt inevitable that Mahiru would join their ranks. That thought made him happy, but also just a little nervous.

"She's super cute, man. Like, way more than I expected, not gonna lie."

"Pretty sure I've told you she's cute before… And this is exactly why I didn't want to show her off. I knew you'd start teasing me."

Miyamoto sounded genuinely impressed as he glanced over toward Mahiru. But Amane wasn't sure how to feel. The praise made him happy, but a part of him felt frustrated to let someone else see her like this.

There was really only one word for Mahiru's outfit today: *adorable*.

Since it was still essentially winter, she'd been wearing a thick coat when she entered the café. But once Mahiru took it off, she revealed an outfit that perfectly balanced charm and maturity. She wore a soft, ivory cable-knit sweater paired with a muted beige-pink, mermaid-line long skirt.

Around her neck and ears shimmered the delicate floral necklace and earrings Amane had given her for Christmas. Their subtle sparkle added just the perfect balance of elegance and refinement without being too simple. They left a graceful and radiant impression.

On her wrist was the matching flower-motif bracelet, a White Day gift from the year before, adding a splash of color to her wrist. Her voluminous hair was gathered into a loose braid tied into a soft knot at the back, creating a calm womanly look that was feminine yet not overly sweet.

But as lovely as her outfit was, what swept Amane off his feet was the enthralled, feverishly sweet gaze from her beautiful features and her irresistibly soft smile. There was something almost *devilish* in that look.

"She obviously loves you to bits," Miyamoto noted.

"…Yeah. I know."

"I thought you'd be way more resistant about bringing her here. Sure, part of it's probably because you didn't want her seeing you work, but I think there's more to it than that. You didn't want anyone else seeing just how insanely cute your girlfriend is, right? She's this adorable and doesn't

even realize how much it shows. It's no wonder you were hesitant before. Honestly, I get why you'd want to do your best for a girl like her." Miyamoto nodded to himself. He glanced over at Mahiru and then turned back to Amane. "Your girlfriend looks so happy."

"She's been wanting to come here for a while," Amane replied. "I think she's taking it all in."

He was in the middle of prepping her order and couldn't exactly fawn over her like usual while he was on the clock. Even sitting alone, though, Mahiru didn't seem the least bit bored. If anything, she looked completely content, savoring the moment.

Every time their eyes met, she gave him a shy, radiant smile. It was honestly a miracle he hadn't botched an order yet.

"Damn," Miyamoto muttered. "Someone's loved."

"I know I am… This is exactly why I didn't want to bring her here unless I had to."

"Yeah, I get it. You're doing everything you can not to grin right now."

"Senpai, please be quiet."

Miyamoto wasn't wrong. Mahiru's affection was obvious in every glance she sent his way. And Amane struggled to keep the warmth from his cheeks. He was doing everything in his power to stop the smile tugging at his lips from giving him away.

"Looks like I'm gonna see a whole new side of you today."

"Then look away, please."

"Nah, dun wanna."

"Oh? Fujimiya-chan's blushing? What's this, what's this?"

Oohashi stepped out from the kitchen, blinking in surprise. She hadn't caught a word of their conversation, but one look at Amane's face told her everything she needed to know.

Apparently, his blush was more obvious than he'd realized.

"His girlfriend's here."

"Really? Where, where?"

"Back there, at the table."

"You mean *that* cutie? Oh wow. Fujimiya-chan, who knew you were such a dark horse!"

Oohashi leaned in to nudge him playfully with her elbow until she caught sight of Mahiru watching them. The moment she noticed, she backed off just a bit more than usual.

Amane wasn't sure whether to admire Oohashi's sharp instincts or just be embarrassed by how far she was willing to push the teasing.

As he squirmed inwardly, Oohashi gave him a sage-like nod.

"Well, with a girlfriend like her, of course you wouldn't be checking out anyone else. No wonder you brushed off those customers who tried hitting on you."

"Wait, *what*?" Amane shot back.

"Oi, Rino, don't just drop that on him," Miyamoto chided. "He clearly had no idea. Now you've given him something else to stress over."

"Uh, so he was ignoring them without even realizing? Yikes, that's brutal."

"…Are you serious?" Amane asked, blinking.

"Dead serious over here… Are *you* being serious?"

Now it was their turn to look stunned. Amane, meanwhile, was completely thrown. The unexpected revelation had blindsided him.

Usually, it was the older customers around his grandparents' age who struck up conversations with him. He couldn't recall any young women ever treating him as anything other than their waiter. But judging by the looks on his coworkers' faces, he'd clearly missed something.

He glanced at Oohashi and Miyamoto, confused. "Huh?"

They both looked back at him awkwardly. And considering they had nothing to gain by messing with him here, that only meant one thing.

It was the truth.

"…That genuinely doesn't ring any bells."

"That's because it probably didn't even register. You're so locked in on your girlfriend that your polite customer smile and subconscious ironclad guard kicked in automatically. And for the record, we know you weren't interested—like, at all. It was obvious you only saw them as customers."

"…Now I just feel bad for Mahiru. She's been worried this whole time…"

"Yeah, and you genuinely weren't paying them any mind…"

To Amane, a customer was just that—a customer. He'd never seen them

as anything more than that. Sure, he could remember the faces of regulars, but when it came to one-time visitors, he barely glanced at them long enough to recognize them a second time. There was simply no reason to.

And that was exactly why it hit harder. He knew he had a good memory, so the fact that he couldn't recall a single thing about any of those supposed moments genuinely caught him off guard.

I've been called dense by not only Mahiru, but Chitose and Itsuki too… Man, I can't even deny it after this.

Because he hadn't paid attention to the people around him, the very things Mahiru had worried about had happened without him even realizing. The shock and guilt slammed into him like a truck, leaving his mind momentarily blank.

A firm pat on the back from Miyamoto snapped him out of it.

"All right, cake set and coffee are up. Go deliver it."

A voice called out from the kitchen, and someone handed him a tray carrying the seasonal cake set and a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

I'm still on the clock. I can't afford to zone out, he reminded himself, pulling his focus back into place.

As he looked down to double-check the tray, something gave him pause. Sitting beside Mahiru's order was an extra item she definitely hadn't asked for.

"Huh? Mahiru didn't order this…"

"Owner said it's on the house. That one's actually something you baked, by the way. She thought it'd be a nice touch," Miyamoto replied.

"Ah… I'll have to thank her later."

"Save it for after. C'mon, move it."

With a casual shove from Miyamoto, Amane gave a small, appreciative nod toward the kitchen, where the owner was still at work. Straightening up, he carefully balanced the tray and made his way toward Mahiru.

The warm scent of coffee mingled with the sweet, toasty aroma of roasted nuts as he approached. Mahiru looked up, and the moment her eyes met his, her expression softened into a bright, tender smile.

"Thank you for waiting. Here's your seasonal cake set and house blend."

"Ah, thank you so much… Wait, um, Amane-kun, this…"

“That one’s on the house,” he said, setting down the tray. “We made a few special items for White Day. After closing, everyone pitched in for the baking. This one—this shape—was mine.”

It wasn’t exactly professional, but just for a moment, Amane dropped the formal tone and slipped back into the way he normally spoke to her.

The café had a tradition of offering seasonal treats from time to time. On Halloween, they handed out pumpkin cookies; at Christmas, little gingerbread men; for Setsubun, some roasted soybeans; and on Valentine’s Day, a single piece of chocolate. They were small treats available to those who asked for them.

This year, for White Day, they’d decided on polvoróns, a crumbly traditional Spanish shortbread cookie.

They’d closed early the night before, and the remaining staff had stayed behind to make them together. Most had gone for hearts or simple round shapes, but Amane had opted for a square cutter, which made it easy to tell which ones were his.

And the wrapped polvorón on Mahiru’s tray? It was square.

“…Amane-kun, you can bake?”

“I made you a cake, remember?” Amane gave her a skeptical look.

He gave her a suspicious look that said, *“Seriously? You forgot the cake I made for your birthday?”* Mahiru’s eyes widened in a flustered panic as she shook her head, eager to backtrack.

“Y-yes, I remember, but I just didn’t know you can bake cookies too…”

“If I can bake a cake, I can bake cookies. I followed the recipe exactly, after actually taking the time to understand it. So yes, believe it or not, I *can* bake!”

Baking a cake was obviously more complicated than cookies. And besides, Amane had been steadily improving under Mahiru’s guidance for a while now. As long as he had a solid recipe, he could hold his own in the kitchen. Fumika wouldn’t have let him help at all if he couldn’t bake.

Mahiru giggled at his reply, the sound light and melodic, like a gentle bell. Her eyes softened with affection as she met his sulking gaze.

“Hehe, hearing you talk like that while dressed as a waiter makes me feel a little shy.”

“My sincerest apologies. In that case, please enjoy your time here.”

“Ah—could you wait just a moment?”

“Yes. What is it?”

Though the café was quiet at this hour, Amane knew he couldn’t linger too long. Still, at her request, he quickly slipped back into his polite, professional tone.

Mahiru raised her hand and curled her fingers into a loose claw, beckoning him closer.

Understanding the gesture, Amane stepped toward her. Then, with a small motion, she tilted her hand downward from a higher angle, urging him to crouch to bring his ear closer.

He tilted his head, slightly puzzled. *Does she want to tell me something in secret?*

Amane bent his knees and leaned in just enough to meet her whisper.

The familiar sweetness of her scent drifted around him, and a gentle warmth could be felt between them.

“…You look wonderful. It feels refreshing, different from usual, and it really suits you. You look so handsome.”

She mumbled sweetly, and her words seeped into his ears like warm water to a sponge.

Her whisper was so precious, it sent a shiver straight through him. Amane froze, and then a swell of unbearable heat surged through him.

He pressed his lips together, barely suppressing the groan that threatened to slip out, and quickly straightened up. When he glanced down again, Mahiru was looking up at him with a bashful smile, and her gleaming eyes betrayed her satisfaction.

Argh, come on!

Earlier, Miyamoto and Oohashi had gone on about how cute she was, but right now, cute didn’t even scratch the surface. She looked like a little devil in disguise. And the worst part? She didn’t even seem to be doing it on purpose.

“Good luck with work, okay?” she encouraged.

“…Thanks.”

Amane managed to keep his voice steady as he replied politely. He

walked back toward the counter with composed steps, but the slight stiffness in his upper body betrayed him.

Waiting for him were the same two grinning faces.

"Fujimiya-chan, you're red as a tomato!"

"Please…just don't talk to me right now."

"Ah, young love."

"You too, Miyamoto-san. Zip it."

Amane grumbled a curt reply, but that only made Miyamoto and Oohashi laugh together. They were clearly loving every second of his flustered misery.

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After that, Amane couldn't exactly hover around Mahiru the whole time, so he slipped back into his usual duties, just as promised. Even so, Mahiru kept her eyes on him as she enjoyed her cake. Whatever it was she found so entertaining, he hadn't the slightest clue.

Fumika's special cake seemed to be right up Mahiru's alley as she ate it with a bright, satisfied smile. When Minase happened to step out from the kitchen, he caught the full force of that smile and froze mid-step with a startled, "*Urk*."

Still smiling, Mahiru looked at him and said sweetly but firmly, "I'm not giving you any."

Minase frantically shook his head to insist he had no such nefarious intentions, which caused Amane to relax, too.

The café was a bit busier than usual due to the White Day rush, but the wave of customers began to thin out before dinnertime. The place had entered its downtime. It wouldn't last long, though. Soon enough, customers looking to grab a light meal would start trickling in again.

"Heeey, Fujimiya-chan's sweetheart~!"

Amane rearranged chairs and wiped down tables during the quiet time when a gleeful, half-whispered voice called out behind him.

He turned around, only to see Oohashi taking advantage of a rare free

moment to sneak over to Mahiru's table while holding what he could only assume was Mahiru's second order of coffee.

The only other customer left was an older woman, a regular who often chatted casually with the staff, so Oohashi must've decided this was her chance to strike.

This caught Amane by surprise. He felt a headache start to set in.

"Fujimiya-cha…?" Mahiru echoed.

"You're Fujimiya-chan's girlfriend, right?"

"Uh, y-yes…"

Mahiru was clearly flustered by the sudden question. But she didn't seem suspicious or alert, just unsure of how to respond. She recognized the woman as the senior Amane had been speaking with earlier, so brushing her off wasn't exactly an option.

I take my eyes off her for one second… Amane sighed quietly and cast a glance toward Miyamoto.

Miyamoto quickly looked away, his expression practically saying, *"Hey, don't blame me."*

"Can you not get so close to my girlfriend so fast? You'll overwhelm her."

"Appreciate the public girlfriend announcement~!"

"Miyamoto-san, please come and collect this woman."

Ooashi would fluster Mahiru more and more if left alone, so Amane turned to Miyamoto, who knew exactly how to deal with her, for backup. But all he got was a deadpan, "The sooner you let her say hi, the sooner she'll be on her way."

"I'm Rino Oohashi," she said brightly. "As you can probably tell, I'm Fujimiya-chan's senior. I'd heard he has a girlfriend he spoils to bits, and I just had to meet you!"

"S-spoils to bits…"

"Yeah! Like, he doesn't even bat an eye when he sees other girls, no matter how cute they are. He's so indifferent, he doesn't even realize unless I tell him."

"Have a little tact, idiot," Miyamoto cut in, sighing. "Bringing up other girls in front of his girlfriend? Really?"

"Ah…sorry, sorry! What I *meant* was that Fujimiya-chan's totally

devoted to you. Like, *really* devoted. He doesn't care about anyone else. I'm pretty sure all he thinks about is textbooks and you, his girlfriend."

"…What do you think I *am*?"

Amane retorted, unable to ignore Oohashi's strange impression of him, then sighed deeply as he looked between her and Miyamoto.

"Uh, these two are the seniors who showed me the ropes when I first started. The woman who just introduced herself is Oohashi-san, and the guy is…"

"I'm Daichi Miyamoto. I've heard quite a bit about you, young lady. Also, feel free to ignore this idiot."

"Daichi! What the heck?!"

"You're loud, and a poor judge of personal space. You're just gonna scare the poor girl off."

"*Huh!?* Don't be so rude!"

"…Mahiru, these two bicker like a comedy duo, but you can safely ignore them."

"Who are you calling a comedy duo, you little brat?!"

Miyamoto reached over and gave Amane a light chop on the head.

"*Ow!*" Amane winced.

Mahiru blinked in surprise, watching the exchange unfold. Miyamoto caught her stare and immediately began waving his hands, flustered. But Mahiru just kept watching him with an amused smile.

"Sorry for hitting your boyfriend," Miyamoto said.

"Aren't you apologizing to the wrong person here?" Amane muttered.

"It's quite all right," Mahiru replied coolly. "Amane-kun said something rude, so please don't worry about it."

"I wish they'd worry a little," Amane quipped.

"But it's your fault for teasing them first, you know?"

Amane had no comeback. With Mahiru pointing that out so matter-of-factly, all he could do was press his lips together in silence. Oohashi's eyes sparkled like she'd just found a new favorite toy.

Great. I can already see myself getting teased into the ground about Mahiru next shift…

The thought alone made his stomach tighten. Still, if Oohashi got too

carried away, he had a last resort ace up his sleeve. He'd simply have to play that card when the time came.

Her pushy attitude reminded him a little too much of a certain busybody, which was probably why he managed to tolerate it.

Meanwhile, Mahiru had regained her poise completely. Without a word, she rose to her feet and gave the two seniors a graceful, polite bow.

"Sorry for the late introduction. I'm Mahiru Shiina, and I'm dating Amane-kun. Thank you for always looking after him."

"Oh no, we should be thanking him. He's always been a huge help around here."

"Not at all. Amane-kun often tells me at our home how grateful he is to you both."

"…At *your* home?"

"She means when she's over at my place," Amane cut in quickly.

Every word was technically the truth.

Amane had briefly explained their living situation before, but he hadn't exactly found the courage to admit that, aside from school, sleeping, or showering, Mahiru was basically at his place all the time. And now that had come back around to bite him.

Mahiru, quick to catch on, followed up without the slightest hesitation or hint of a lie. "I often visit during exam prep, so…"

Relieved that Mahiru had played along perfectly, Amane did his best not to let it show. He kept his expression neutral, careful not to betray the unease he felt beneath the surface.

"Ahh, well, Fujimiya's a pretty serious guy…and looks like his girlfriend is too. Rino, maybe you should bottle some of their discipline up and brew it into tea. Then chug it."

"What do I have to do with this? And what kind of logic is that!?"

"You could stand to learn from their diligence and grace. Everything you do is loud and dramatic."

"Says you, Daichi!"

How do they always end up arguing, every time?

Miyamoto had called Oohashi tactless earlier, but honestly, Amane was starting to think that was just a boomerang coming back around to strike

him. As the two launched into another pointless back-and-forth, Amane kept his thoughts to himself. He valued his life, after all.

When his eyes met Mahiru's, she gave him a small, awkward smile. In response, Amane leaned in slightly and whispered, just under his breath, "They're always like this," with a little shrug.

He let out a quiet sigh, careful not to draw attention from the bickering pair, and let his gaze wander around the café…only to lock eyes with a woman seated three tables away. She was one of their regulars who was always in around this time for her coffee.

Their eyes met, and a chill ran down his spine.

Without missing a beat, he moved toward her with silent steps and bowed slightly. "I'm terribly sorry for the disturbance."

The woman raised a hand to her lips, a refined smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she let out a soft, amused chuckle.

"Oh, it's quite all right," the customer said. "Daichi-chan and Rino-chan are full of life, and that's what matters most. Being close enough to bicker like that just means they get along well. I don't mind it at all."

"Thank you very much."

She was apparently one of the café's longtime regulars who had watched over Miyamoto and Oohashi's antics from the beginning. Their squabbling wasn't new to her. That familiarity, and the fact that only Mahiru and this woman were present aside from the staff, probably made the two feel comfortable enough to drop their usual filters.

"You and your girlfriend seem to get along wonderfully too, Amane-chan," the woman added with a knowing look. "Now I get why you always turned me down when I offered to introduce you to my granddaughter."

"I'm devoted to my girlfriend, after all."

For the record, she was the third person who tried to set him up with their granddaughter.

A few other customers had proposed similar offers afterward, and while he knew they were mostly joking, he still turned every one of them down. Even so, the offers made his heart skip a beat, and always left him feeling a little guilty.

If he could help it, he'd rather they not bring it up at all.

Lately, those comments had finally died down, much to his relief…but now, hearing it again, he couldn't help but wonder.

Do I really come off as someone worth introducing to their grandkids? I mean…I'm just a guy who works at a café they happen to like. We're practically strangers, he thought, slightly bewildered.

"Hah ha, hearing you say that puts me at ease," the customer said with a smile.

"…That feels a little contradictory somehow."

"It just means I can see that you truly treasure your girlfriend. And that's a wonderful thing. Men who cheat should be kicked to the curb, I say."

Amane couldn't believe she'd said something so fierce with such a dignified smile and elegant voice. He decided not to comment on the contrast and simply returned her smile with a polite one of his own.

Maybe she'd gone through something difficult in the past. But that wasn't his place to ask, not when he barely knew her. And he wasn't going to pry.

Still, he agreed with her wholeheartedly.

"You're absolutely right," he said. "I think sincerity is essential when building a life together."

His words earned an even warmer smile from the woman.

"It's lovely that you two get along so well. Between the cake and the sweet treat you two have shown me, I'm quite satisfied. May I ask for the check?"

"Of course. Right away."

Behind them, Miyamoto and Oohashi were still going at it with their bickering. Amane was the only one currently free to assist, and though he noticed the faint glimmer of a plea in Mahiru's slightly troubled smile, he gave her a silent look that said, *"Hang in there just a little longer,"* and guided the woman to the register, receipt already in hand.

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By the time Amane returned from the register, Miyamoto and Oohashi had somewhat calmed down. Both wore sulky expressions.

They're like children when they act like this…

Miyamoto had his head in his hands, mortified that their usual antics had played out in front of a customer. When he finally noticed Amane had come back, he lifted his head, forced a sheepish smile, and muttered, "Appreciate you handling the register."

"She was the only other customer in, so it wasn't too bad, but under normal circumstances, that wouldn't be appropriate. Also, she watched you the whole time with the warmest smile, so you'd best brace yourself to be teased when she next drops by."

"I'm well aware," Miyamoto nodded.

"Ooh, you just got told oooff," Oohashi quipped.

"I'm talking to you too, Oohashi-san."

"Wait, *wut?*"

"Oh, please. There's no way you'd be let off the hook after that."

Amane shot her a flat look that said, *"How could you possibly think you were innocent?"* Oohashi responded with an exaggerated, drawn-out, "Sooorry~!" though honestly, that probably should've gone to Miyamoto.

Can't they just be a little more honest with each other…?

Amane didn't say it out loud. He let out a long, tired sigh right as Minase poked his head out from the kitchen.

"Heeey, Oohashi! Sorry to interrupt, but our owner wants you."

"Huh? What for?!"

The sudden call clearly threw her off. The moment she heard Minase say the owner wanted to see her, Oohashi panicked. She spun around and bolted toward the hallway at the back.

But in her rush, her movements got sloppy. As she turned, the edge of her hand clipped Mahiru's second cup of coffee.

Normally, the first cup would be cleared away before the second was brought out. But since it had been set aside for later and table space was tight, the second cup had been left sitting awfully close to the table's edge.

A sharp clink of ceramic scraping against ceramic rang out as the cup jerked upward, its rim tipping dangerously.

Crap—

Amane was right there and reacted instantly. He lunged forward and caught the cup before it could tip over and roll across the table, just barely avoiding a full-blown disaster.

But Mahiru hadn't finished that cup yet. There was still a decent amount of coffee inside. While he managed to stop it from falling, some of the liquid slipped through his fingers and splattered across the table with considerable momentum. Amane's attempt to block it was in vain.

Just as the dark brown wave spilled over the edge of the table like water tumbling off a cliff, Mahiru realized what was happening and instinctively reached out to block it with her hands.

Though the flood didn't completely breach through, stray droplets and a thin stream that escaped her impromptu hand-dam splashed against the pink-beige fabric of her outfit, leaving behind splotchy, unpleasant brown stains.

"Ah—!"

"My sincerest apologies, miss! Are you hurt at all?"

Miyamoto was the first to speak. His voice, though clearly panicked, was firm and direct. Without missing a beat, he offered an apology and rushed off toward the counter to grab supplies, taking over for Amane and Mahiru, who had sacrificed their hands to minimize the damage.

Minase, who had seen the entire scene unfold from the kitchen, had already prepared some towels. Miyamoto snatched them up without a moment's delay once he reached the counter.

"You okay, Mahiru!? Did it burn you!?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine. This skirt is pretty thick, and the coffee had already cooled down, so…"

Though Mahiru didn't look like she was in pain, and not much coffee had spilled, Amane was still worried it might have burned her. He kept a careful eye on her expression while he grabbed a used, folded hand towel and pressed it into the puddle on the table to absorb the liquid before it could drip further.

Once the cloth had soaked up the mess, he gently wiped Mahiru's hand with the clean towel that Miyamoto had fetched, then used it to halt the

slow, creeping spread of coffee across the tabletop.

This had all happened in less than a minute.

Miyamoto shot a death stare at Oohashi, who stood still in shock at what she'd done.

"Rino, what the hell are you doing?"

"I-I'm really sor—"

"Please stop, Miyamoto-san. This isn't the time to point fingers. Oohashi-san, you can apologize later. For now, could you ask the owner if it's okay to bring Mahiru into the back?"

"R-right… I'm really sorry…!"

Scolding her wouldn't help anyone. The only person with that right was Mahiru, the victim of the mess. But she didn't show even the faintest trace of anger. Looking down at the fresh stain on her skirt, she spoke in a calm, composed voice.

"We'll need to remove the stain quickly before it sets."

The way Mahiru didn't blame her only made Oohashi feel worse. But she shook off the shock, pulled herself together, and bolted off toward the back as fast as she could.

Barely half a minute later, she returned and called out, "All good!"

Taking that as his cue, Amane grabbed Mahiru's bag and coat from the basket and gently guided her toward the back room.

"Sorry to ask, but could I leave the cleanup to you two?"

"We've got it covered. Just take care of your girlfriend, Fujimiya."

"Um, I'm terribly sorry about what I did," Rino said to Mahiru nervously.

"It's no problem at all. Don't worry about it. If we treat it quickly, the stain should come right out when I do the laundry. And it didn't burn me, so there's no need to stress."

Oohashi bowed her head, her face clouded with guilt.

Mahiru offered a gentle smile, giving a small shake of her head and a wave of her hand to say it was okay.

Even so, Oohashi didn't seem to feel any better. She was the type who could shrug off trouble done to her, but felt awful if she caused trouble for someone else. If she'd had dog ears, they'd be drooping flat against her head.

“You don’t need to worry, okay?”

“Ah, looks like a customer just came in. Let’s save the rest of this for later. Miyamoto-san, could you take that one?”

“Sure. Rino, I’m leaving cleanup to you. I’ll handle the front.”

Miyamoto took over, figuring it wasn’t a good idea to have Oohashi deal with customers in her current shaken state, especially with the chance of another mishap. He shifted smoothly into professional expression as he moved toward the entrance.

Amane gave Oohashi a final glance to make sure she’d be all right on her own, then gently guided Mahiru toward the staff break room in the back.

As for Mahiru, who ended up drinking her coffee through fabric, she seemed genuinely intrigued by the employee-only area and the layout of the café, which one normally wouldn’t have a chance to see.

Once they reached the break room and Mahiru had settled onto the sofa, Amane knelt beside her and carefully inspected the stain on her skirt.

Thanks to both of them instinctively reaching out to block the coffee, they’d managed to avoid a major spill. Even so, two stains—each about the size of a five-hundred yen coin—had bloomed across the fabric near her thighs. The skirt wasn’t stark white, so the discoloration wasn’t overwhelmingly obvious, but it was still clear enough that anyone would notice something had been spilled.

“Sorry… You got all dressed up, then this happened.”

“It’s okay. These things happen sometimes. I accidentally spilled black tea myself, not too long ago.”

Mahiru shook her head gently, calm as ever. Her unbothered attitude only made Amane feel guiltier. And if he felt this bad, then Oohashi was probably taking it even harder. She was the type to dwell on things more when being forgiven than scolded.

As Amane examined the stain more closely, debating whether Mahiru should change into the outfit they’d brought for their date, a soft, polite knock echoed through the room.

“It’s Itomaki. Is now a good time?”

“Owner…”

Fumika’s voice caught Amane by surprise. He was sure she was still

busy with work. He glanced at Mahiru, silently checking if it was all right to let her in. When Mahiru gave a small nod, he called out, “Yes,” and the door opened a moment later.

Fumika stepped into the room, her expression looking about thirty to fifty percent more troubled than he’d ever seen her. Her eyes quickly landed on Mahiru, who sat calmly on the sofa, and her brows furrowed further.

“I sincerely apologize for what happened today, especially after you took the time to visit us. Of course, we’ll cover the cost of your meal. Please also send us the full bill for cleaning your clothes. And just to be safe, I’d like you to see a doctor. We’ll also cover any medical fees you may get…”

“Th-there’s no need to worry. The coffee wasn’t hot, and it didn’t even touch my skin…”

Overwhelmed by Fumika’s rapid-fire apologies, Mahiru shook her head even more vigorously than before. But Fumika still looked deeply concerned.

“Even so. The fact remains that our café…has ruined the time you were looking forward to spending with him.”

Looking genuinely remorseful, Fumika accidentally let something slip. Amane tensed up instantly.

“Huh? A-Amane-kun, you told them?”

“…I only mentioned it as the reason for leaving early, that’s all.”

“Oh, he was as happy as a clam!” Fumika said with a warm smile. “Said it was like a little date. He was so glad you were looking forward to it as much as he was, he wanted everything to go just right. He even double-checked his customer service, practiced his smile, and today, before you came, he kept checking the mirror to fix his hair, and sneaking glances at the entrance to see if you’d arrived yet.”

“Okay, Okay! Please stop there, I’m begging you!”

When he’d asked to leave work early, Amane had told Fumika the reason. And while he felt a little bad about leaning into her soft spot, he’d casually mentioned how much he was looking forward to the date with Mahiru, hoping it might help his case. On top of that, he’d casually dropped comments during past shifts about how the day had him equal parts

nervous and excited.

Still, he never expected any of that to come back to haunt him like this. At this rate, he just wanted to bury his face in his hands and disappear.

These were the exact kinds of embarrassing moments he didn't want Mahiru to know about. But Fumika felt so bad about the spill, she had apparently decided that a full-blown confession of Amane's behind-the-scenes efforts was part of her atonement.

Amane was just about to groan and beg her to stop when suddenly, Mahiru's eyes widened. Then, just like that, they lit up with sparkles.

"No, please, tell me more."

"Mahiru!?"

"C-can you really blame me? It's not often you show how excited you are…let alone tell someone else why."

"…I couldn't help it. I was just that excited."

Amane had never wanted Mahiru to know that his nonchalant attitude was just a front and that underneath, he'd been practically buzzing. But now that Fumika had spilled everything, there was no use trying to hide it.

"I was looking forward to seeing your reaction when you saw me working…and, well, we've never really had a proper date where we met up like this before. And when I mentioned it to the owner, she gave me this really expectant look, so…"

"Well, that's because…it made for good enrichment…" Fumika explained.

"Enrichment…?" Mahiru asked.

"Don't think too hard about it," Amane urged.

That was just one of Fumika's quirks. One that, in Amane's opinion, was almost more of a bad habit. There was no reason Mahiru needed to understand that in full detail.

Amane cleared his throat to shift the mood, then glanced at Mahiru's skirt, wanting to address the issue at hand.

"…Anyway, we should really deal with the stain. Uh, Owner, do you happen to have anything she could change into?"

"If a spare uniform's all right, we have one available."

In food service, unexpected accidents that ruin an employee's clothes

happen relatively often, so workplaces keep backup uniforms of many sizes on hand.

It was only a temporary fix, but Amane felt genuinely relieved that Mahiru wouldn't have to walk around in a pair of oversized men's pants. Just as that sense of relief settled in, he caught sight of Fumika's expression.

Her earlier look of concern was gone. Now, she seemed vaguely disappointed.

"Aw, I should've kept some cute outfits on standby…"

"You don't get to treat Mahiru like a dress-up doll just because she is cute, okay?"

"Flirting right in front of me? Why, thank you for the treat."

At this point, Amane had to wonder if this woman could find amusement in anything he said. He didn't bother saying anything and simply watched as Fumika stepped out to fetch spare clothes.

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While Mahiru got changed in the women's dressing room, Amane stepped out and focused on cleaning the stains from her skirt. He'd already taken care of the two large spots from earlier, but as he worked, he noticed several smaller splatters scattered across the fabric.

So he carefully rinsed the skirt with water, then gently dabbed at the marks with a mix of water and detergent. Luckily, the stains had almost entirely vanished.

However, the splatters had spread farther than he'd initially realized. By the time he was done, the skirt had absorbed quite a bit of water in the process.

There was no way he could wring out a delicate skirt like this without risking damage to the fabric. So instead, Amane pressed a towel against it to soak up as much moisture as he could. Even then, it was still noticeably damp, and there was no way he could, in good conscience, let her wear it like that.

With that in mind, he made his way back to the break room…only to find

Mahiru already there, fully changed and waiting for him.

And for some reason, she went all out.

"It suits you incredibly well," Fumika gave Mahiru a genuine compliment.

Since only her skirt had gotten dirty, Amane couldn't help but feel that giving Mahiru the entire uniform set was more mischievous than considerate. Still, knowing Fumika, it was probably just pure goodwill. And just as she'd said, the uniform really did suit Mahiru exceptionally well.

Amane wondered whether Fumika had the same uncanny talent as Ayaka to guess someone's measurements at a glance. Whether she did or not was anybody's guess, but the fit was so perfect it felt like the uniform had been tailored just for her.

These kinds of outfits could easily look awkward if the sizing were even a little off. But this one gracefully covered her body's lines while still enhancing the beauty of her figure. She wore it so naturally, it was as if Mahiru was saying, *"Got a problem? I've worked here the entire time!"* She could've passed for a seasoned café employee.

Oohashi always carried a refined, elegant air in her uniform. But on Mahiru, the same outfit gave off an entirely different impression. She looked more charming than refined.

And for some reason, she'd even styled her hair into a neat chignon when she changed, clearly getting into the spirit of things somewhere along the way.

Mahiru herself seemed a little giddy wearing the part-time uniform, something so outside her usual wardrobe. The moment Amane walked in, she beamed, stretching out her arms as if to proudly say, *"Look at me!"*

She was so impossibly cute that Amane might've pulled her into a hug and smothered her with affection on the spot had Fumika not been in the room.

He was more than satisfied with the unexpected dose of cuteness, but still turned to give Fumika an incredulous look that asked why she'd gone so far to dress Mahiru up.

Fumika met his look with a composed, cheerful smile. "I'm just glad we happened to have the perfect size for you."

"Thank you for going out of your way. Right now, I feel like I've gained something special," Mahiru replied. "Standing here like this…it almost feels like I work alongside Amane-kun. And that makes me really happy."

She walked over to Amane's side, smiling up at him. It was a smile so bright, so full of warmth, that Amane couldn't help but think, *There's no way I can let anyone else see this.*

It would steal the heart of any customer who so much as glanced her way, without question.

Since the chance had come up, Mahiru asked Fumika for permission and then snapped a few photos with Amane. She looked so blissfully happy doing it that Amane's face tingled with embarrassment just watching her.

"My, oh my. I wouldn't mind if the two of you worked here together for real…" Fumika said.

"I'm afraid my guardian would never approve," Mahiru replied without missing a beat, cutting her off with a firm yet sweet smile.

“Besides, if I were to start now, I’d likely get used to the job right before the time I’d have to quit. I truly appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

Her tone remained gentle and her smile bright, but there was clear conviction in her words.

Fumika smiled back tenderly. “My, is that so? What a shame.”

She must’ve sensed something deeper behind Mahiru’s words, but chose not to press. Instead, she backed off with graceful restraint.

Amane did his best to keep a neutral expression as he stole a glance at Mahiru from the corner of his eye.

He could see it. Beneath that dazzling smile, so bright you’d almost want to shield your eyes, was a murky shadow.

Students needed approval from their school to take on part-time work. But before that, minors also needed a guardian’s signature and seal on the paperwork. That was the standard procedure.

Mahiru’s case, however, was different. She avoided contacting her parents as much as possible.

Amane had only met her mother once, but that was more than enough. She’d made herself crystal clear that she didn’t want to be contacted unless absolutely necessary. With that kind of weight hanging over her, Mahiru had no intention of reaching out unless there was no other option.

For Amane, *callous* was the first word that came to mind when he thought of Mahiru’s mother. Her father, on the other hand, had seemed more composed, and Amane figured he wouldn’t be too difficult to contact if the situation called for it.

But for Mahiru, even reaching out to him now was something she wanted to avoid at all costs. And honestly, Amane agreed. If staying out of contact meant conserving her peace of mind, then that was the right choice. At this point, even he felt it was far too late to try to repair those broken ties. So unless Mahiru herself brought it up, he would never mention it.

He knew it was best to be considerate right now, but not overly so. That kind of sympathy only made things worse. So he kept his expression neutral, doing his best to act natural.

But Mahiru still saw right through him. She gave him a small, awkward

smile, then mouthed the words, *"I'm okay,"* with her softly tinted lips.

If she'd looked like she was forcing it or faking her composure, Amane wouldn't have hesitated to say something. But judging by her expression, he didn't have to worry much. Reassured, he lifted his gaze.

"…Um, I know I'm a bit late saying it in person, but I wanted to thank you properly. Thank you for helping me with Amane-kun's birthday surprise."

Mahiru's expression softened, returning to its usual warmth. She gave Fumika a polite bow.

She'd respected Amane's wish to wait before visiting his workplace until he felt ready. And since Fumika had once joked that seeing the two of them being lovey-dovey would be thanks enough, Mahiru had refrained from showing up in person. Instead, she'd sent her gratitude through Ayaka, along with a handwritten letter and a small gift.

"Oh no, it was no trouble at all," Fumika replied cheerfully. "If anything, I should be thanking you for the enrichment. I've made great progress."

"Progress…? With which?"

"Mahiru, you don't need to dig any deeper," Amane quickly cut in.

His eyes silently pleaded with Fumika not to say anything weird in front of Mahiru, but all she gave him in return was that same bright, sparkling smile.

"I don't entirely understand, but if it helped you in some way, then I'm glad," Mahiru replied, tilting her head slightly.

"Oh, it was a huge help. Honestly, *I* should be thanking *you*. If I was able to help you two find even a little piece of happiness together, then I'm more than satisfied. Happy couples are my absolute favorite."

"Th-thank you…?" Mahiru replied, still a little confused.

"Whatever your reasons, I really am grateful. Thank you for everything, as always," Amane added.

"I've hardly done anything worth thanking," Fumika replied with a soft laugh.

Amane figured there probably wasn't a single person on earth who could change Fumika's mind once she got going. So he gave up trying and simply bowed his head in appreciation.

She chuckled quietly at his gesture. “You two really do seem so close. It’s heartwarming to see.”

“...Thank you.”

“Fujimiya-kun always works hard, and as the owner of this café, I couldn’t ask for more. But I did worry a little that it might be eating into the time he gets to spend with you, his girlfriend… But if you’re both supporting each other, then that’s wonderful. Especially since he’s doing all this to get you a—”

“Aunt Fumika, stop. Don’t fuss over them too much.”

A voice cut in to interrupt Fumika before she could say something Amane definitely didn’t want Mahiru hearing. Not yet, anyway.

The sound of the door opening was followed by a voice Amane knew all too well—one he heard often at school. He turned instinctively toward it and saw Ayaka standing there with a paper bag in her arms.

Her usual ponytail was down, and she was in casual clothes.

“Kido-san...!?”

“Yup! Hi there, Shiina-san, Fujimiya-kun. Oh, and Fujimiya-kun, that uniform really suits you. Looks like it was worth the wait, huh, Shiina-san?” Ayaka said, flashing a perfect wink.

Oh yeah, Amane thought, *I guess Kido’s never actually seen me in uniform before. But wait, she’s not even staff. Why is she here in the break room?*

“Wait, why are you even here, Kido?”

“Auntie asked me to bring a change of clothes,” Ayaka replied breezily. “I live pretty close, so it worked out perfectly. Can’t have Shiina-san going home in the café uniform, right? And with her skirt still damp, it’s probably better to get it cleaned properly. So, I rushed over as fast as I could.”

Judging by the timing, Fumika had probably contacted Ayaka as soon as she caught wind of the situation.

Fumika felt guilty for calling Ayaka out so suddenly, especially on White Day, of all days. Her shoulders slumped slightly as she gave her a regretful bow.

“I’m truly sorry for troubling you on this occasion, Ayaka-san,” she said, her voice full of remorse.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ayaka replied with a warm smile. “We all help

each other out when we're in a pinch. And sorry to you too, Shiina-san. You were looking forward to seeing Fujimiya-kun in his uniform today, right? Probably not fair for me to sneak a peek, huh?"

True to form, Ayaka had been considerate in more ways than anyone could count. She'd never once let slip to Mahiru the reason Amane had started working, and she'd even avoided visiting the café when Amane was there so she wouldn't see him in uniform. So that Mahiru could have that special moment to herself.

Even now, despite the situation, Ayaka still felt sorry for catching a glimpse.

She shifted the paper bag's handles into the crook of her elbow, then pressed her palms together in front of Mahiru, silently mouthing a heartfelt *"Sorry!"*

"N-no, it couldn't be helped, and I'm already more than satisfied… It was wonderful," Mahiru said, her cheeks softly flushed with warmth.

"Heh heh, I'm glad. Makes me feel like introducing him here was totally worth it." Ayaka grinned, then held out the bag. "Here's the change of clothes. Sorry if it's not your style. I grabbed something I haven't worn yet. I was rushing and kinda ended up picking something I wanted to see you wear."

"No, thank you. I really appreciate it," Mahiru said as she accepted the bag.

"You're heading out after this, right? I shouldn't intrude any further, so now that I've done my part, I'll be on my way."

Ayaka had only come to deliver the change of clothes, and true to her word, she handed off the bag and immediately began getting ready to leave.

Amane couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for making her go out of her way.

"You came all this way just to bring me a change of clothes… Thank you so much, especially when you're busy," Mahiru said, bowing gratefully.

"Thanks a lot, Kido. I'll return the favor sometime," Amane added.

"No, no, really—it's nothing!" Ayaka waved them off with a cheerful grin. "Aunt Fumika asked me, after all. And she said I could take home any leftover cookies as a reward, so I'm good! Oh, and busy? Not exactly—I've

actually got Sou-chan waiting for me outside. He tagged along."

"Huh? Why didn't he come in?"

It made perfect sense that Souji—her boyfriend—had come with her. The evening sun had already dipped below the horizon, and winter's early darkness had started to blanket the sky.

But Amane couldn't quite understand why Souji hadn't come inside.

He works here. Even if he's not on shift, he can come into the staff room.

As he looked at Ayaka, puzzled, she slowly shook her head.

"Well, Shiina-san's here, isn't she? I knew she needed a change of clothes, so I had no idea what she might've been wearing when I came in. Also, Miyamoto-san was out there messing with him."

"Ah...figures."

Miyamoto was probably teasing Souji for being with his girlfriend on White Day instead of working. He could more or less guess as much.

"And with that, I'm off! Gotta rescue Sou-chan and head home to enjoy some sweet quality time together. So I shall now take my leave! *Poof!*"

Whether she was going for samurai or ninja was anyone's guess, but with that theatrical final remark, Ayaka made a swift exit from the break room.

Mahiru and Amane exchanged a glance and laughed.

"Well then, Fujimiya-kun, you can clock out now. It's getting late, so please go on and walk your girlfriend home."

"Wait, isn't it still a bit early?"

He glanced over at the wall clock. The hands were pointing to fifteen minutes before his scheduled end time. Since he hadn't worked a full shift today to begin with, he'd planned to stay until the end at least. But Fumika, as if she could read his mind, gave him a calm, reassuring smile.

"The evening crowds are light this time of year, and we've got plenty of staff on tonight, so it's no trouble at all. Consider it a small apology for the trouble we caused you earlier. Oh, but before you go, check in on Oohashi-san. She looked a little down."

"What happened wasn't really her fault, though... Still, I'll take you up on your offer and head out."

Fumika hadn't been directly responsible for the incident, yet she still felt

responsible. Feeling it would be rude not to, Amane accepted her kind proposal and turned to Mahiru.

"Mahiru, could you change and wait for me here? I'll clock out and get changed too."

"Yes, I'll be waiting."

Mahiru looks so cute in our uniform, Amane thought. *I still like her usual style more, though.*

Before leaving the break room, he gave her a gentle pat on the head.

Behind him, Fumika let out a delighted laugh.

Amane immediately regretted doing that right in front of her. He should've waited until after she left, but that ship had already sailed.

Feeling just a little embarrassed now, Amane pursed his lips and made his way back toward the front. Before heading to the changing room, he paused to peek into the main hall.

A few new customers had come in while he and Mahiru were away, but even with just two staff members covering the floor, everything seemed to be running just fine.

There was just one thing. Oohashi stood near the counter with a somber expression, just out of view from the customers. Anyone could tell at a glance that she wasn't acting her best self. She didn't seem shaken anymore, but it was obvious her mood was at rock bottom.

"Oohashi-san. The stain came out clean, so it's all good."

"Really…? That's awesome, but…that still doesn't make it okay..."

"Honestly, it's fine. Don't beat yourself up over it. I don't think Mahiru's upset either."

Mahiru seemed more surprised than anything else. Judging by how cheerful she'd been afterward, taking photos in the borrowed uniform, she'd probably enjoyed herself way more than she otherwise would have.

Of course, Amane knew better than to speak her feelings for her, but it was safe to say Oohashi didn't need to be sinking into the floor from guilt.

"It's not about whether she's angry or not," Oohashi said quietly, her voice heavy with guilt. "…She went out of her way to dress up, all excited for her date with her boyfriend, and I went and ruined it. That's what I can't get over. I mean, I'd be so shocked if this happened to me… To think I did it

to someone else is just… Special days like this are memories you never forget, right? So, ideally, you'd want them to be full of happy moments. Wouldn't you rather have an anniversary you can look back on and think, *'That was such a wonderful day'?*"

"Well, yeah, I guess…" Amane replied.

"I know she's probably not mad," Oohashi murmured. "But that's not the point. This is more like a me problem."

Oohashi didn't doubt what Amane said to comfort her. She knew he meant it, and that made her feel all the more guilty.

Oohashi didn't just regret her mistake; she was genuinely disappointed in herself. Amane realized this wasn't something he could fix with a few comforting words. This was a matter of her own conscience.

At this point, all he could do was let her process it in her own time.

"...If that's how it is, then I really can't do much else for you. I won't pretend I can fully read Mahiru's heart, so I won't put words in her mouth—but at least remember that I don't hold what happened against you. I believe this will be another thing we can look back on together and laugh about someday."

Amane believed in cherishing happy memories and keeping bitter ones from getting mixed in if possible. But he doubted this White Day would turn into the kind of sour memory Oohashi feared.

"For the record, Mahiru was super excited wearing our uniform, even just for a little while."

As Oohashi slowly lifted her head, Amane recalled Mahiru's beaming face and gave a faint, wry smile.

"She said it felt like a lucky chance to do something she normally couldn't. We even took photos together in our matching uniforms. She looked completely thrilled. She told me she was going to treasure them."

Mahiru had restyled her hair beautifully and stood beside him in a matching uniform, her face lit up with pure, innocent happiness. Who could possibly think she was upset?

What happened might not have been ideal, but Mahiru had a way of turning even small mishaps into something meaningful. She had calmly taken this accident in stride too, and somehow managed to find her own

way to enjoy the day.

Of course, once they were home, Amane still planned to check in with her to make sure she hadn't just been putting on a brave face. But if there was one thing he knew for sure, it was that Mahiru had a remarkable talent for finding happiness on her own terms.

Someday soon, he decided he'd ask her how she remembered this day and what it meant to her.

Then, seeing the shimmer in Oohashi's eyes as she hovered on the edge of tears, Amane gave her a gentle smile.

"Well then, I'll head out first. Good work today."

"...You too," Oohashi replied.

As the bell chimed and she turned to help a nearby customer, Amane called out to her once more. Her response, though still a mumble, carried a bit more strength this time.

He watched her shift into her cheerful customer-service smile and saw her off. Then, turning his gaze, he spotted Miyamoto returning from a newly cleared table, a tray of plates and cups balanced in his hands.

Miyamoto looked visibly relieved to see Amane walking back, calm and composed.

"Your girlfriend all right?"

"Yes. Everything's fine on our end, and thanks to the owner's kindness, I've been told I can clock out a bit early. Will you guys be fine here?"

"Compared to how hectic it was earlier, this is nothing. I'm sure the owner'll be back out soon to help either in the kitchen or on the floor. And yeah, after everything that's happened, I'm not surprised she let you go early."

"Then I'll leave the rest to you guys. Oh, and please make sure to check in on Oohashi-san. And use absolutely no harsh words right now. She's super bogged down."

"I know. I was too harsh on her earlier."

Miyamoto looked a little sheepish as Amane added that last reminder.

Miyamoto was friendly with everyone. Straightforward, calm, and something of an older brother to those around him. But when it came to Oohashi, he tended to get worked up. In fact, he often treated complete

strangers with more patience and care than he showed her.

Amane knew it all stemmed from some tangled-up feelings between the two, but even so, he couldn't help thinking a little wistfully, *If Miyamoto-san just softened his approach a bit, maybe Oohashi-san would feel more comfortable being honest with him.*

"Pushing someone forward is great and all, but don't hit her back too hard in the process, okay? Oohashi-san's more sensitive than she lets on."

"…Yeah, I know that. Who made *you* the expert?"

"See, I hear out problems from any side, whether it's you or Oohashi-san. Believe it or not, she struggles with things you don't even know about."

Just as Miyamoto sometimes vented to Amane, knowing he could keep a secret and listen without judging, Oohashi did the same. She, too, would confide her worries and frustrations in him.

Naturally, Amane never repeated a word of those personal worries to anyone else. That said, most of their complaints tended to be about *each other*.

From Amane's point of view as the unofficial mediator, there was only one piece of advice he wished he could say to them both: *"Just be honest with each other already."*

When Amane hinted that there were things even he didn't know, Miyamoto looked at him sharply, sending a faint chill down Amane's spine.

Still, he didn't flinch. Instead, he met Miyamoto's stare with an innocent look that said, *"I know nothing!"*

"Look, instead of glaring at me, think of ways to support her. Try to make her feel comfortable opening up to. Also, another customer just came in."

The chime above the door rang out, and Amane tilted his head toward the entrance.

In the blink of an eye, Miyamoto slipped seamlessly into his usual welcoming smile and headed off to greet them.

Amane was once again impressed by how quickly he could shift gears. Then, with a small sigh, he silently prayed that someday, Miyamoto's feelings would finally reach their mark.

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“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Amane said.

When he returned to the break room, now dressed in his casual clothes, he found Mahiru already changed and waiting for him. Fumika was nowhere in sight, so she was likely out front or tucked away in her office.

“No, it’s fine. I didn’t wait long. Besides, sometimes waiting can be part of the fun.”

“So I did make you wait a little…”

“I’m not so impatient that I’d get tired of waiting after just five or ten minutes, you know? Besides, I was having fun imagining what kind of outfit you’d choose to wear today. That really suits you.”

“It’s nothing fancy enough to meet your expectations, though.”

He had put some thought into what to wear, but in the end, it wasn’t anything flashy. Just a dark gray knit layered over a white shirt, navy tapered pants, and a jacket. If anything in his outfit might’ve caught Mahiru’s eye, it was probably the scarf. He’d wrapped the one she’d given him last Christmas snugly around his neck.

Wearing something she’d gifted him made him feel a little shy, but judging by the warmth in Mahiru’s smile, she clearly appreciated it.

“You pull your outfit off really well, too. So this is what Kido picked out, huh?” Amane said, studying Mahiru’s ensemble.

“I don’t usually wear clothes like these, so they feel new to me.”

“Oversized looks like that are pretty cute, too. I’ll have to thank Kido later.”

Mahiru was dressed in loose-fitting denim overalls paired with a hoodie that had playful, stylized illustrations of a cat and a rabbit across the chest. The hoodie’s quirky design, complete with pun-filled speech bubbles, gave the whole outfit a playful, whimsical charm.

A quick glance near her feet revealed she’d rolled up the cuffs of her pants because they were too long, which reminded Amane that Mahiru was quite a bit shorter than Ayaka. But he knew Mahiru would pout if he said anything, so he refrained.

Mahiru had worn plenty of styles before, but maybe because of her personal preferences, he couldn't recall her ever going for something this boyish. That made the look feel especially fresh.

"Where do you think they sell funny hoodies like this?" Mahiru mused. "If they have other designs, I'd love to get another one so we can match."

"You want me to wear one as well?"

NEKO
NEKON
DORU

“Wouldn’t it be cute if we matched? I think it’d be fun.”

Clearly charmed by the hoodie’s goofy design, Mahiru giggled and shot him a playful grin. Amane let out a small, disbelieving sigh, but the truth was, he’d already decided to message Ayaka later to find out where she’d bought it.

Mahiru didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed by the look. If anything, it seemed like she’d stumbled across her new favorite style. Watching her that cheerful made Amane smile too.

Without a word, he reached down and picked up the paper bag of clothes she’d left by her side.

“Shall we head home?” Amane offered her his hand.

“Sure.” Mahiru grabbed it without a moment’s hesitation.

Still warm from the heated room, her fingers were a little toastier than usual. But as he intertwined their fingers and stepped out through the staff entrance, a chill grazed his cheek.

It was early spring, but winter hadn’t fully let go. Once night fell, the chill seeped up from the pavement. Even with her coat on, Mahiru had a slight shiver. After a moment of fidgeting, she leaned into his arm to steal a bit of his warmth.

Amane wasn’t particularly fond of the cold, but right now, he found himself almost thankful for it—if only because it brought out such an irresistibly cute side of her.

“You feeling okay, Mahiru?”

“Are you asking about the cold?”

“Ah…well, that too, but…I meant your clothes. They got dirty, didn’t they?”

It didn’t seem to bother Mahiru earlier, but he’d waited until they were alone to bring it up. Mahiru looked up at him with an expression that said, *“You're still worried about that?”*

“Oh, that. Honestly, it’s not something worth making a fuss over. If I’d been wearing something formal, like a furisode or a dress for a special occasion, I might’ve been a little upset or worried. But this was just a casual

outfit, and you already took care of the stain. I actually feel worse for Oohashi-san. It really affected her."

"Yeah…it definitely got to her, but I don't think there's much anyone can do until she comes to terms with it herself. Especially since customers came in right after, so she never even got the chance to properly apologize."

"That'll make her feel even more guilty, won't it? Please let her know there's no need to worry. You got the stain out completely, so it's really not a big deal."

The last time he'd seen Oohashi, she had managed to pull herself together a bit, but guilt like that didn't fade quickly. He had a feeling she'd eventually want a proper chance to apologize.

He figured when that time came, he'd talk it over with Mahiru and help make it happen.

With that thought tucked away, he glanced at her and found her still in high spirits.

"By the way, what did you think of the staff room? I tried to tidy it up a little."

"It was kind of exciting, getting a peek at a space customers don't usually see."

"Yeah, unless you work there, the back's off-limits."

"I was surprised by how roomy it was… and the smell of coffee was lovely. It reminded me of how you smell when you come home from work, Amane-kun."

"…Wait, I smell like coffee after work?"

Since he worked at a café, he was usually pretty careful about that. He kept deodorizing spray in the break room and always gave himself a thorough spritz before heading home.

Apparently, it hadn't been enough. Without realizing it, he'd been bringing Mahiru a little coffee-scented souvenir every time he walked through the door.

"It's not a bad smell. It's a warm smell, like sweet coffee."

"I guess I need to go heavier on the deodorant."

"Aww…but I like it."

"So, which do you prefer? My usual scent or the coffee?"

Mahiru had a clear soft spot for Amane's scent. Every now and then, she'd find one of his shirts left out in the living room, waiting to be tossed in the wash. And instead of dropping it in the laundry immediately, she'd savor the faint trace of him left behind on it.

Granted, it was partly his fault for not tossing it straight into the hamper or the washing machine, but still. He never imagined she'd actually sniff it. The first time he caught her doing it, he'd been so shocked and embarrassed that he practically begged her to stop.

But then she looked up at him with those pleading eyes and softly asked, *"Just a little…?"*

Flustered beyond reason, he ended up giving in, but on the condition that it couldn't be anything he'd sweated in.

So now, Mahiru had permission to secretly enjoy the scent of his jackets or shirts he'd only worn for a short while…and Amane, for better or worse, had decided to just look the other way.

"It's funny you say that, because you always happily sniff my dirty shirts," he said, teasing.

Mahiru's gaze darted around. Her face flushed, turning red from something other than the cold.

"…Th-that question isn't fair. Just think of it like I'm…switching up the flavor now and then."

"I'm honestly a little scared you're gonna end up developing all kinds of *tastes*."

"Like what?"

"You know—smells, muscles, voices…fetishes like that."

To be fair, it already felt like Mahiru had a thing for all three. And the second he started listing them, her posture went noticeably stiff.

She knew exactly what he was talking about.

"...I-It's fine. Totally fine."

"Uh-huh, sure it is."

"Let's just say I'm into *everything* about you, Amane-kun."

"Not even going to deny you've got a fetish then, huh."

"That's just your imagination... Anyway, don't *you* have anything like that?"

"Oh? You said '*don't you*'—so you're admitting it now?"

Without answering, Mahiru bumped her forehead against his arm and started rubbing her face against it.

It was one of the adorable moves she made whenever she wanted to dodge a topic. But Amane knew better than to expose one of her habits. If he did, she'd just let out a flustered *"Uuu..."* and start sulking. So, he let her continue her harmless little assault.

Amane glanced down at the watch on his free wrist. They were running a bit ahead of schedule, but the sky had already gone dark.

"Anyway, what do you think? Still feel like checking out the select store, like we planned?"

The store was definitely still open, and it wasn't so late that they'd risk getting stopped for being out this long. But after everything that had happened today, he wasn't sure if Mahiru still had the energy or the interest.

It was entirely up to her. If she wanted to skip it, he'd be happy to do whatever else she had in mind. But if she were still in the mood, he'd make sure they had a good time browsing together.

Mahiru blinked, then let out a thoughtful little "Hmm…" She stayed close, still tucked against his side, then tilted her head up to meet his gaze.

"…Let's save that for our next date. I want to take my time picking things we'll use every day, so I'd rather go when I've got more energy. Today…"

"Today?"

"Our favorite bakery should still be open, right? Let's choose something from there for dinner. Just this once, let's rely on store-bought food."

A local bakery had recently become one of their go-to spots. It opened early in the morning and stayed open until seven at night.

They had a great selection, but the place was popular—there was no guarantee their favorites would still be in stock. Then again, showing up this late meant they might stumble across something new, something that wasn't usually available during their regular visits. That bit of unpredictability seemed to be part of the appeal for Mahiru, too.

"Yeah… Hope we find something good."

"If they still have a baguette or some sandwich bread, let's make French

toast for breakfast tomorrow."

"Perfect. Today's been lovely."

The idea of hunting for little treasures together made it feel like a sweet, impromptu date. Amane chuckled at the thought, and Mahiru, just as happy, let out a soft giggle of her own.

"Hehe, you're getting ahead of yourself. But…true, it really *has* been a lovely day."

It was a bit early to be saying that, but having chosen to wrap up the day that way, Mahiru clung to Amane's arm with a gentle squeeze, then started walking toward the station with an extra bounce in her step. Matching her pace, Amane softly took hold of her warm fingertips.

Chapter 10

Spring's Arrival and Signs of a Looming Storm

Aside from Oohashi's unexpected flurry of apologies, nothing much happened after White Day. It was now time for this year's school closing ceremony.

Technically, they were still second-years until the new academic year officially kicked off, but it already felt like that chapter had ended.

"Why always me…?"

Itsuki had made the classic student mistake of nodding off during the principal's long-winded speech, only to get caught by their homeroom teacher. He was promptly hit with a relentless stream of scolding on his way back.

There weren't any classes on the day of the closing ceremony, just a short homeroom session to go over plans for the break. Even so, Itsuki managed to get himself called out right after the ceremony and before homeroom had even started. Amane shot him a look of disbelief.

If he were to give Itsuki even a sliver of defense, it'd be that the guy had stayed up late cramming the night before and had barely dragged himself to school on time. So really, it wasn't all that surprising that sleep had won in the end.

"Yeah, our homeroom teacher's pretty strict about that stuff," Amane said. "You heard how stern he was just then when he warned us about how we'll officially be focusing on our entrance exams and all that. It went on forever. When I peeked out into the hallway, I saw the other classes had already been dismissed."

Homeroom had ended, and students were already heading home. Some looked visibly relieved, others groaned at the hassle of it all, while a few

wore uneasy expressions as the weight of their upcoming exam year began to sink in.

Amane was in the "relieved" camp. Sure, he had his share of nerves about the demanding year ahead, but he faced it with a determined mindset. His plan was simple: study hard, rest well, and stay consistent. No shortcuts, no slacking.

"Man, I swear," Itsuki grumbled. "Why was I the only one who got caught? So unfair."

"It is what it is. The others just had their heads down," Amane said dryly. "You were out cold."

From what Amane could tell, Itsuki was the only one from their class who'd been caught, but he'd also spotted a few students in other classes dozing off. They'd just gotten lucky that their seats were out of the teachers' line of sight.

"Urghh…" Itsuki let loose a dramatic groan.

Amane gave him a flat, unimpressed look as he packed away his pencil case and a folder of papers into his bag.

"You're so mean…" Itsuki muttered.

Amane met Itsuki's eyes with a deadpan face that said, *"You just figured that out?"*

"I'm nice to people who haven't done anything wrong."

"You mean it was my fault?!"

"Duh. You kind of had that coming…"

Sure, Amane could sympathize a little. A flat, monotonous speech could put just about anyone to sleep. But resisting that temptation with sheer willpower and self-discipline was part of what it meant to be a responsible person. Even if the speech seemed pointless on the surface, there was always the chance it contained something worth hearing.

Still, Amane spared Itsuki his true thoughts of the speech, and that it had felt more like idle chatter to kill time than anything meaningful.

As he got ready to leave, making a show of being unimpressed, Amane threw a glance at Itsuki's bag.

It was a lot lighter than last year's. He'd already taken his textbooks home ahead of time like it was second nature. That alone showed he was

finally taking exam prep seriously.

"Come to think of it," Amane said, "you randomly crashed at my place around this time last year."

"Oh yeah, I did, didn't I? 'Cause I fought with my old man. Well, I still do now," Itsuki added with a wry look.

Amane found himself thinking back to that unexpected sleepover last year. Somehow, it felt weirdly nostalgic.

"I still can't believe you dropped that on me last minute," he added. "Yeah, you'd just fought with your dad, but most people wouldn't say yes to a sleepover on the spot like that. You should be grateful my place was actually clean enough to have you over."

"Thank you, Shiina-san."

"Hey!"

"Did someone call me?"

Just as Amane was about to snap at Itsuki for mentioning Mahiru's name out of nowhere, she poked her head into the room.

She hadn't been in the classroom earlier due to some errands, and the two of them had been waiting for her to get back. Her appearance was so perfectly timed that even Itsuki let out an impressed, "Whoa…"

And, as expected, Chitose trailed in right behind her, a binder tucked under one arm as she followed Mahiru inside.

"All done with the teacher?"

"Yes. I heard my name just now—what were you talking about?"

Mahiru tilted her head slightly, curiosity written across her face. It seemed she'd caught her name but hadn't caught the rest.

"Oh, no," Itsuki said. "Remember how around this time last year, I suddenly crashed at Amane's place? He was just saying that the only reason he could let me stay was that it was actually clean. So I figured I owed *you* a proper thank-you since you're probably the one who gave him both the motivation and the skills to keep it that way."

"Hehe, I see," Mahiru smiled. "I'll gladly accept your gratitude then."

"Et tu, Mahiru?" Amane looked at her, stunned.

But Itsuki wasn't wrong. Thanks to Mahiru's patience, persistence, and top-tier cleaning skills, Amane's place had undergone a complete

transformation from the disaster it was before she came into his life.

He no longer left stuff scattered across the floor, the window tracks stayed dust-free, and the hardwood was always clean and polished. Gone were the days of tripping over clutter or launching full-blown rescue missions for missing socks. Now, there was plenty of space to roll out an extra futon whenever Itsuki crashed. Thanks entirely to Mahiru, Amane could finally keep a home he wasn't embarrassed to have people visit.

Of all people, Itsuki was probably the most shocked by the transformation. He'd known Amane back when his place wasn't just a messy dump, but a full-on safety hazard.

"I can't deny it," Mahiru remarked. "Your room was in rough shape when we first met, Amane-kun."

"Y-yeah, all right, fair enough, but still…"

"Preach, preach!" Itsuki exclaimed.

"I can take it coming from Mahiru, but it doesn't sit right when you say it."

"Playing favorites, huh?"

"Yeah, you bet I am. Got a problem with that?"

Amane snorted. Honestly, it'd feel weirder to treat Itsuki like some kind of special case. From across the room came a muffled groan.

"Ugh… He's not even try'na hide it anymore."

"Oh please," Chitose cut in, her voice stony. "Mahirun's been Amane's favorite since forever. Where've you been?"

Her blunt remark landed a little too cleanly. It wasn't wrong, and that made it all the more uncomfortable. While Itsuki groaned in protest, Amane just let out a long sigh for a different reason.

"You're on my side, right, Chi?"

"Well, duh, of course I am. But seriously, Ikkun, why'd you fall asleep when you're sitting up front and center? That wasn't smart at all. Your attendance number always puts you right at the start of the row during assemblies. You had to know you'd get in trouble."

"Don't use realistic arguments with me, Chi…"

Itsuki's full name was Itsuki Akazawa.

He wasn't sure how other schools handled it, but at theirs, attendance

numbers were assigned alphabetically by last name. And in their class, no one's surname came before Akazawa.

Since Itsuki usually landed the number one spot on the attendance sheet, he was always first in line for everything, including seating arrangements. That meant he was front and center during ceremonies, stuck at the edge of the row every single time. This time was no different.

So the fact that he'd dozed off right there, in full view of the teachers, made it pretty much inevitable he'd get busted.

"You've gotta sleep at the right time, you know?" Chitose said, hands on hips. "Don't tell me you already forgot how you pulled that all-nighter and made yourself sick?"

"I'll be more careful…" Itsuki replied.

Amane was shocked. "Whoa… Chitose just used *logic*…?"

"Excuse me? What do you take me for?"

"L-let's all calm down, shall we…?"

Amane averted his gaze under the weight of Chitose's sharp stare, feigning ignorance as he looked around the classroom instead. He was a little surprised to see how many students were still hanging around.

A few had already left, but most lingered, happily conversing, laughing, and reminiscing about the past year. Watching them, Amane couldn't deny he'd grown attached to this class.

"Are we not leaving yet?" Mahiru wondered.

"Hmm? Oh, we'll head off soon. Just, y'know, feeling kind of sentimental… This is the last time we'll be in this class."

"Yeah… We really lucked out this year."

Compared to their first-year group, this class had been far more close-knit. Everyone got along reasonably well, and even if there were a few who didn't connect on a personal level, they still cooperated when it counted. Most of the class had been level-headed, which made a huge difference. There were no hotheads or troublemakers who got on teachers' nerves.

"Everyone was kind and got along well," Mahiru said softly.

"Yeah," Amane nodded. "I heard from some of the teachers that ours was the calmest, well-behaved class. Made their lives a lot easier."

"Yup, we were a pretty quiet bunch," Chitose said.

"*Quiet*, eh…?" Amane slowly turned to look at her.

"What's that look supposed to mean, hmm?"

"Nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Ugh, you're so annoying."

"Hey, hey, let's not start a fight now," Itsuki cut in to mediate. "But yeah, we really did have a good class. Nice and quiet. Though Yuuta still got the girls squealing."

"They knew not to fangirl during class, so we can let them off," Chitose added.

A decent number of girls in class had their eyes on Yuuta, but most of them were sincere and respectful about it. If he ever asked them to dial it back, they'd take it to heart and wouldn't push their luck again. Thanks to that, his school year had gone by relatively peacefully.

Things had been calm compared to the chaos Amane remembered last year.

"Come to think of it, where is he?" Itsuki asked, glancing around.

"He said he didn't have club today and had something to take care of around lunch, so he headed out early. We're gonna hang out over spring break anyway, so no need for some dramatic goodbye," Amane answered.

Amane, Itsuki, and Yuuta had already made plans to hang out during the break, just a casual meet-up to unwind between study sessions. There was no reason to get sentimental.

Some of the girls had looked a little disappointed when Yuuta slipped out without much fuss, but none of them tried to stop him. They simply smiled and saw him off.

"That's so like him," Itsuki said, glancing at Yuuta's empty desk.

Just then, a bright voice cut through the solemn mood that had started to settle over the group.

"Hey, you four over there! You guys free after this?"

They turned to see Tachikawa waving at them with a smile as cheerful as his voice, standing amid a group of classmates he'd been chatting with.

They hadn't talked much over the past year, since they had different circles, but Amane had gotten to know him a little recently after borrowing his notes. He gave him a quick nod in return.

“I’m free. No work or plans today,” Amane said.

Itsuki raised an arm. “Samesiees!”

“I’ve got dinner with my family later, but I’m good until then,” Chitose confirmed.

“I’m free too,” Mahiru said. “Why do you ask?”

None of them were always available at the same time, but today just happened to work out. Tachikawa lit up with a grin, happy with their replies.

“Today’s our last day as a class, so I figured, why not have a karaoke party with whoever’s free? Thought you guys might wanna tag along too.”

“Tacchiii,” Chitose chided. “Couldn’t you have said that in the group chat earlier?”

“I *just* decided, okay?!”

“Dang, man’s out here makin’ moves.”

Amane pulled out his phone and opened the class group chat they’d all joined during the culture festival. Sure enough, Tachikawa had just posted: *“Class farewell karaoke party today! If you’re in, reply and meet at the station by 1:30 PM!”*

A flurry of read receipts and replies of interest were already popping up.

The invite had come out of nowhere, and the chat had instantly descended into chaos.

“Bro, a little heads-up would’ve been nice! I’ve already got plans with my girlfriend.”

“Then prioritize her, duh.”

“Watanage, you’re the worst.”

“YOU’RE the worst! We've been in the same class for a year, and you still can't get my name right?! It’s WatanaBE!”

Amane couldn’t help but smile at the back-and-forth flooding the chat. Meanwhile, Tachikawa was watching them with hopeful eyes, clearly waiting for their answer.

“So, you guys in? No pressure or anything,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m down,” Amane replied casually.

“In that case, if I may, I’d be happy to join as well,” Mahiru followed.

“Count me in, too!” Itsuki exclaimed.

“As long as we don’t stay out too late, I’m good,” Chitose reminded.

Amane had a feeling that if he agreed, Mahiru would follow. Still, he knew that wasn’t why Tachikawa had invited them.

Tachikawa fist-pumped the air with a cheery “Heck yeah!” and beamed at them like an overexcited golden retriever.

“This time, let’s have Amane sing his heart out for us!” Itsuki grinned.

“What kind of torture is that?” Amane retorted.

“Oh, you can sing, Fujimiya?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m painfully average.”

He wasn’t tone-deaf or anything—he could carry a tune—but his singing was nothing worth showing off. With how talented some of their classmates were, claiming to be good would only earn him a few scoffs.

“Aww, I was hoping to hear you and Shiina-san duet,” Tachikawa said, disappointed.

“At least leave Mahiru out of it, would you?”

Mahiru was too shy to sing in front of people. If someone pressured her to, she’d probably shut down.

Amane would gladly join her if she ever wanted to sing, but otherwise, he wouldn’t put her on the spot or make her uncomfortable.

“By the way, Fujimiya—let me treat you to drinks today!” Tachikawa suddenly exclaimed.

“Where’d that come from?” Amane asked, blinking.

“I still owe you for lending me your notes last month. Figured this might be my last shot to pay you back, y’know?”

Now that he mentioned it, Tachikawa had never really thanked him for that. Mainly because Amane kept brushing it off, insisting it wasn’t a big deal and refusing anything in return. Every time, Tachikawa would let out a frustrated little *“Grr…”* under his breath.

So the fact that he pounced on this chance now meant he’d probably been lying in wait for just the right moment.

“I also kinda-sorta copied your notes for some of the other subjects in there, so let me thank you for that too,” Tachikawa added with a sheepish grin.

“Sweet, free food for me!” Itsuki jumped in immediately.

“Nice try. I’ve got zero obligation to treat you too.”

“So mean… You’re just gonna leave me out like that? I’m gonna cry.”

“You’re try’na mooch off me, man. I’m the one who’s gonna cry.”

“Itsuki, you’re the worst,” Amane said, jabbing him lightly in the side. “Don’t act like you earned it.”

Itsuki turned to Tachikawa with a pitiful look, silently pleading, *“I don’t get anything at all?”*

“In *any* case, we’ll gladly tag along,” Amane said, turning to Tachikawa with a nod.

“Yep, that’s what I like to hear!”

Tachikawa let out a satisfied *“Hmpff,”* puffing his chest out proudly. There was something about him that gave off serious big-dog vibes.

Amane slung his backpack over his shoulder with a grin. The message had said to meet at the station by 1:30 PM, which meant they’d need to grab lunch before long.

Amane glanced at Mahiru. “Wanna head home first or just eat out?”

She smiled softly. “I didn’t prep lunch today, so either’s fine.”

Since she’d probably be making dinner later anyway, Amane figured they might as well take it easy and grab lunch out. He suggested stopping by a fast-food place.

“Then I could really go for a teriyaki egg burger,” he said. “You good with burgers too, Mahiru?”

“Yes, that’s fine by me. You always go for the limited-time egg stuff, don’t you?”

“Of course. Eggs are god’s gift to mankind, so…”

“Oh! Can Chi and I come too, then?” Itsuki asked. “Her family’s out today, and I don’t feel like heading home.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

“Mind if I tag along too?” Tachikawa jumped in. “I was planning to eat there anyway.”

“Sure, go for it,” Amane said with a shrug. “Though…are *they* gonna be okay with that?” He subtly nodded toward the group of guys Tachikawa had been chatting with earlier, still messing around nearby.

Tachikawa shrugged with a laugh. “They’re heading to a family restaurant before karaoke. Apparently, they’re on a mission to demolish some limited-time jumbo parfait. I’m not much of a sweets guy, and just looking at it would probably give me a stomachache, so I’m out.”

Amane vaguely recalled seeing something on the news about a family restaurant coming out with a monstrous, cream-loaded strawberry parfait. Those guys probably wanted to conquer it using the bottomless stomachs only high school boys could boast.

Hope they make it to karaoke in one piece, he thought, picturing the towering mound of sugar from the article.

Amane stepped out of the classroom with everyone.

“Been forever since I went to karaoke,” he muttered.

They passed through the school gates, now a place of goodbyes for those not tied to after-school clubs. But Amane didn’t feel especially nostalgic, just thoughtful.

He wasn’t one to go to karaoke on his own, so the last time had been during the culture festival party.

“Really? I actually went solo the other day,” Chitose shared. “Singing feels amazing.”

“Solo…?” Amane echoed.

“Yup! Just me, one mic, one room. It’s perfect for blowing off steam, you know?”

Chitose regularly enjoyed active outings like karaoke and sports. Whether she was with friends or flying solo, she always found a way to have fun.

Amane preferred calmer settings, so it was a trait he admired.

“You love singing, Chitose-san? I didn’t realize you liked it that much.”

“Yup, love it. But I don’t always invite you because I know you’re not a fan of singing in front of people.”

“Wait, really?” Tachikawa said, eyes widening. “Maybe I shouldn’t have invited Shiina-san then… But hey, they’ve got maracas and tambourines and all that. If you don’t wanna sing, you can hype everyone up.”

“Oh, no, it’s all right… I didn’t know they offered stuff like that,” Mahiru said, a little surprised.

“Things might get a little loud if we ask for marracas.”

“Karaoke’s all about being loud.”

“Yeah, but there’s gotta be a limit.”

Even with all the soundproofing, there was always a chance someone in a nearby room might complain if things got *too* rowdy—not to mention the possibility of getting a warning from staff or, worse, a visit from some irritated neighbor. Moderation was definitely key.

That said, unless someone went full banshee or started throwing punches at the walls, they’d probably be fine. And while Chitose could get a little carried away now and then, she wasn’t the type to go overboard just because she could. Their other classmates were the same.

“But man, the culture festival after-party feels like forever ago,” Itsuki muttered, feeling nostalgic.

“Oh yeah, that happened,” Amane replied offhandedly.

“Remember when Yuuta roped you into a duet?”

“Right, and who made him do that? Who?” Amane shot him a look. “It was *you*, you evil mastermind.”

“Why does all the fun stuff happen when I’m not there?!” Tachikawa cried out. “You guys are all tight, so we had no idea what was going on in your room.”

Tachikawa had been at the after-party, but with so many people, they’d ended up split across different rooms. He’d missed out on what happened on Amane’s side.

“Ours was super chill.”

“Yeah, well, Kadowaki wasn’t in ours,” he added with a wry smile. “So the girls weren’t exactly feeling it. I’ll admit, my guys and I weren’t good enough to get the mood going. It was kind of awkward. I felt bad.”

“What’s Kadowaki doing this time?” Amane asked.

“I asked him earlier—he’s coming,” Tachikawa affirmed. “Said he’s busy around lunchtime, so he’ll just meet us at the karaoke place. He’s eating separately.”

Amane glanced down at his phone again. Still no reply from Yuuta, but at least now he knew he’d be showing up, even if a bit late.

The girls are gonna lose their minds once they find out he’s coming…

Since Yuuta hadn't responded in the group chat, nobody else knew he'd be making an appearance.

They're gonna go crazy when he walks in.

Amane could already picture the scene.

"This is gonna be so much fun!" Tachikawa beamed, innocent and carefree.

Amane nodded and gave him an awkward smile.

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Despite a few bumps along the way, Tachikawa's last-minute karaoke night turned out to be a hit. By the end, everyone left feeling satisfied.

There were a few mishaps. The reservation was nearly canceled due to a name mix-up (Tachikawa had called it in, but the staff misheard him as "Uchikawa"). Sparks flew between a few girls the moment Yuuta arrived, and someone even ended up at the wrong karaoke joint and had to be picked up. But in the end, the chaos only added to the fun, and the whole thing came together as a surprisingly enjoyable night for everyone involved.

Mahiru had been a little hesitant at first, but once she loosened up, her excitement kicked in without her even noticing. Her cheeks were more flushed than usual, and she beamed as she watched Amane sing. The other boys in the class fell victim to her killer smile, so it might be clever to teach her to hold back a little.

Even the initially shy Mahiru ended up singing a few popular songs in her clear, sweet voice, helping set the mood and getting everyone into it.

They spent about three hours at the karaoke joint before finally heading their separate ways. By the end, Mahiru looked completely wiped—her social battery drained—but she still looked satisfied. For her, too, the outing had been refreshing and genuinely enjoyable.

"That was fun."

After saying their goodbyes, Amane and Mahiru strolled hand in hand as they followed their usual route home.

With April just around the corner, the days were getting longer. It wasn't even five yet, but the sky was still bright, painted in the soft colors of early evening. A warm, orange glow bathed them as they strolled side by side.

Mahiru had settled down a little, but there was still a light bounce in her step that gave her away.

"It certainly was. Everyone got very invested," Mahiru nodded.

"Well, when you're in a big group like that, it's better to keep the energy going than stay all stiff and formal."

"...Did I, um, break a rule of etiquette?"

"No, no, not at all. I just meant it's more fun when you loosen up a little. And honestly, you were way more hyped than usual."

"I…was?"

She blinked at him, clearly unaware herself.

Amane didn't mention the bounce still lingering in her step. Instead, he gave her hand a gentle squeeze and watched her adorably dazed expression.

"Whenever you do something new with friends or…well, me, you always get a little more excited than usual," Amane said with a chuckle. "You don't go all out, but you smile more, and it's like you have fun in your own quiet way."

"D-do I really…?"

"Yeah. Chitose and Itsuki noticed too."

"And no one told me?!"

Mahiru's face turned red the moment she realized she'd been under observation the whole time. She shot him a flustered glare, but with those misty eyes and adorably pouty lips, the expression didn't have an ounce of menace. If anything, Amane found it irresistibly cute.

"Everyone loves seeing you light up like that, Mahiru. It's adorable," Amane said with a grin.

"Geez!"

"You had fun, didn't you?"

Mahiru pouted, not because Amane and the others had joined in on the fun, but because they'd seen her enjoying herself like any ordinary girl her

age.

So when Amane gently asked how she'd felt about the day, she fell silent. Her lips pressed together as she looked to the ground, cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"…I had lots of fun," Mahiru murmured. "I think it'd be lovely if I could have fun like this with my friends again."

"Yeah, that would be nice."

He wasn't exactly the most outgoing person himself, but even he could see how much Mahiru had changed. Back when they first met, she always wore the polished mask of the perfect "Angel." But little by little, she'd started letting that go. She lived freely, as just Mahiru Shiina, a regular girl.

She still put up a front now and then, but even so, she'd begun revealing more of her true self. And because of that, she was building genuine, lasting connections that went far deeper than appearances.

Amane couldn't deny feeling a tad lonely that there were parts of Mahiru that others now got to see, pieces of her that had once felt like his alone. But more than that, he felt happy. Happy that Mahiru was beginning to live brighter, fuller days, surrounded by people who truly cared for her.

Also, Mahiru still has so many sides to her that only I know.

And he had no plans to share those. This much was more than enough for now.

"I'm starving after all that singing," he said breezily.

Mahiru kept her gaze lowered, her lashes casting delicate shadows over her eyes. She shyly nudged the back of his hand with her fingers as she held it, hiding her embarrassment by plotting a playful attack.

Then, after taking a small breath to collect herself, she looked up and smiled.

"Hmm, then I'll start dinner once we're back."

"Oh yeah, it's your turn tonight, isn't it? What's on the menu again?"

When Amane had work, Mahiru usually took care of dinner. On his off days, he either cooked himself or let Mahiru handle it if she was in the mood. It wasn't a perfectly even arrangement, but they more or less took turns.

That said, whoever was home always helped out regardless of whose

“turn” it was, so the system had long since turned into more of a formality than anything else.

Mahiru had done the grocery run yesterday and planned out the meal, so she was the only one who knew what they’d be eating tonight.

“I saw pork loin on sale yesterday, so I thought ginger pork with shredded cabbage, marinated tomatoes, and miso soup would be nice. Oh, and we should finish the kinpira green peppers I made, so I’ll add those too. Any preference for what goes in the miso soup?”

“What do we have at home? We aren’t stopping by any stores on our way, are we?”

“No, we have the usual tofu, wakame, and aosa. I also froze some enoki and maitake mushrooms the other day, so we can use those. There are carrots and onions, too… And if sliced green onions are okay, we’ve got some frozen.”

“Then let’s go with aosa, tofu, and enoki. I love aosa.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure to add extra… There’s not much for you to help with today, so just take it easy, okay?”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Geez…”

Ever since Amane had started working, Mahiru had been trying to keep him out of the kitchen, figuring he must be tired. But from Amane’s point of view, the last thing he wanted was for her to handle everything alone. More than that, cooking together meant more time with her—and the sooner they finished, the more time they’d have to relax together afterward. Naturally, he wanted to help however he could.

“Hey, haven’t I gotten pretty good at shredding lately?”

“You have. Your cuts are much finer now. Before, they were…”

“…As thick as a pencil.”

There’d been a time when Mahiru asked him to shred cabbage for a side dish. He hadn’t cut himself or anything, but the result was a sad pile of thick, clumsy strips that no one would mistake for “shredded.”

Thinking back, it was obvious how far he’d come. Of course, that also meant he’d started from rock bottom.

“Why do you sound so proud?” Mahiru asked, half-exasperated.

“I’m just admiring my remarkable progress; that’s all.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve improved a lot. Good boy,” she said, indulging him with a small smile.

“Right? I knew you’d get it,” he beamed.

Skill-wise, he still wasn’t at the point where Mahiru would give her stamp of approval…but he’d improved enough that when he cooked solo, there wasn’t much left for her to critique. For someone living on their own, his skills were more than sufficient.

And honestly, part of him hoped Mahiru would start thinking it was a waste to let someone this capable just sit around.

“I wanna show off how much I’ve improved.”

“My goodness…”

Mahiru’s response wasn’t exasperated or dismissive—it was soft and affectionate. Amane could tell, easily, after all the time they’d spent together.

She smiled at him tenderly, her gaze full of love.

Her affectionate eyes reminded Amane of one crucial thing.

Ahh… She loves me to bits…

A pleasant warmth bloomed in his chest, so intense it was almost ticklish.

Amane gently tightened his hold on her hand.

“All right then, once we’re back, it’s time to get dinner started,” Amane said.

“Not before washing your hands and gargling,” Mahiru reminded him, firm as ever.

“I know, I know.”

He held back a laugh, shoulders shaking slightly at the motherly tone she’d slipped into.

Mahiru noticed immediately and puffed out her cheeks.

“You just thought I sounded like your mom, didn’t you?”

Amane didn’t bother denying it, and he didn’t tease her for basically admitting it either. He just chuckled softly, keeping her fingers entwined with his.

Their shadows stretched long ahead of them as they strolled side by

side. Amane glanced down at them, a calm sense of peace settling over him as he walked home with Mahiru.

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They returned to their apartment complex at a leisurely pace, enjoying the scenery along the way. When they arrived, they found a lone boy standing in front of the closed entrance doors.

It was a boy in his early teens. He was just a little taller than Mahiru, with light brown hair and a face that, though still youthful, was already strikingly well-defined. But what stood out most were his sharp and intelligent eyes, which held a keen awareness beyond his age.

After nearly two years of living at this apartment, Amane had come to recognize most of the residents, even if only in passing. He didn't know every single one, but he was sure he'd never seen this kid before. A striking face like this would've stuck with him after just one glance.

Had the boy been locked out? Or was he here to visit someone? It was hard to say. But judging by the tense look on his face, one thing was clear: he was in trouble.

"There's no kid like that living here, right?" Amane asked, turning to Mahiru.

"Not that I can recall," she replied. "He looks like he might be in some kind of trouble…maybe he's here to see someone?"

Since Mahiru didn't recognize him either, it was safe to assume the boy wasn't a resident.

Still, they couldn't get inside without going through the lobby, and it wasn't exactly safe for a kid to be out alone at this hour. Figuring they should at least check on him, Amane started walking toward the intercom—only to notice the boy's expression growing tenser with every step they took.

"Hey there, something wrong? Are you here to see someone? If you know their room number, I can help you call them."

Amane crouched slightly as he spoke, his voice soft and gentle. But the

boy didn’t respond or even look at him.

It wasn’t that he looked away.

He’d been staring at Mahiru the entire time, his gaze steady and determined.

“…Nee-san?”

He spoke hesitantly in a gentle, high-pitched voice still untouched by puberty.

His soft voice was neither sharp nor shrill, yet it echoed clearly through the empty entranceway, as if demanding that neither Amane nor Mahiru could ignore him.

Bonus Chapter

What It Means to Be a Family

If asked which girls Mahiru was closest to in class, Chitose and Ayaka would be the obvious answers. But that didn't mean she only ever spent time with them.

Mahiru was the kind of person who could get along with just about anyone, and she often had cheerful conversations with the other girls in class.

One day, when Amane didn't have work, he stopped by the staff room after class to take care of a few errands. He'd asked Mahiru to wait in the classroom.

When he returned and reached the hallway just outside the door, he paused.

He heard her happily chatting with her classmates, and for a moment, Amane hesitated, not wanting to interrupt the pleasant exchange.

Then, one of them asked her a question.

"Shiina-san, do you have any siblings?"

They were probably in the middle of a lively chat about family or something along those lines. Amane remembered the girl who brought it up had a younger sister.

Through the hallway window, Amane could see Mahiru's face. She showed no signs of discomfort, simply wearing her usual reserved smile.

"I don't. I happen to be an only child."

"Really? That's a surprise! You're so good at looking after people, I totally thought you had a younger brother or sister. Guess I was wrong."

"If she did, they'd be a stunning sibling duo for sure! It'd be a total treat for the eyes!"

Their words were innocent and genuine. They meant no harm and merely spoke their mind.

After all, the only people in their class who truly knew about Mahiru's parental situation were Amane and, at most, maybe Chitose. Even Itsuki wasn't fully in the loop. It wasn't that they didn't trust him. It was simply too sensitive a subject for Amane to share on her behalf.

He knew the girls' comments were nothing more than casual conversation. But from his perspective, it still felt like they were unknowingly adding salt to wounds that hadn't fully healed.

"Who do you take after more, Shiina-san? Your mom or dad?"

"If I had to say, I believe I take after my father."

Her gentle smile never wavered. And she wasn't lying either. Having met Asahi in person, Amane could say with certainty that Mahiru really did take after him.

"Oh wow. So your dad must be beautiful too, huh?" one girl said.

"Ah, now I really want to see him! He's gotta be a total silver fox," the other remarked.

"Hey, don't just call someone else's father a 'fox' outta nowhere. That's kinda rude."

"Oh—sorry!"

"Oh, it's quite all right. My father is indeed getting on in years, after all," Mahiru replied.

Just then, as she covered her mouth to laugh, her eyes happened to meet Amane's through the window. He flinched in surprise, but Mahiru's smile only widened. It was her way of signaling he didn't have to worry about interrupting.

"So you take after your dad, huh? They do say daughters usually resemble their fathers, don't they? I'm the same…unfortunately."

"Yeah, you're his spitting image. When I saw him the other day, I thought, *'Ah, no wonder…'*"

"Oh no… Does this mean I'm doomed to inherit a thinning hairline?"

"Everyone's gotta say goodbye to their hair eventually, so don't complain too much."

"My dad would cry if he heard that."

“Because it’s touching?”

“No, because a high school girl pities his scalp.”

“Right… I just rubbed salt in the wound.”

“In the wound or his follicles?”

“Girl, stop.”

Amane couldn’t help but think the conversation had gone wildly off course. Just then, Mahiru glanced in his direction, giving him a subtle look that said it was safe to come in now.

Amane felt mixed feelings towards her consideration and how attuned she was. As he made his way over, he deliberately made a little noise by bumping into a desk to make his entrance obvious.

Mahiru looked up. The moment she saw him, her face lit up, whether from the relief of escaping the topic or simply because he’d finally shown up.

“Amane-kun.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. And thanks for keeping her company,” he added, offering a polite nod to the three girls chatting with Mahiru.

He felt a bit guilty for leaving her alone, but one of the girls quickly waved her hands, flustered.

“Ah! Sorry, Fujimiya-kun. We kind of borrowed your girlfriend for a bit.”

“No, no, she’s not mine or anything.”

“Wait, what…?”

“Oh, I just meant she’s not mine to lend or anything like that. She *is* my girlfriend, yeah, but I’d never try to control what she does. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Mahiru was his girlfriend, and she was perfectly happy to be called that. But saying “she’s mine” didn’t sit right with Amane. The phrasing sounded possessive, and that wasn’t how he saw her. She was someone he cared for deeply, someone precious to him. He wanted them to be partners on equal footing.

If the word didn’t also carry that connotation, maybe he wouldn’t have minded.

Still, whenever he did call her “mine,” it was always in the sense of “my girlfriend.”

Mahiru grinned and said, “I don’t mind being yours, Amane-kun,” a line that sent ripples through their little audience. Though Amane had a feeling she’d said that on purpose to steer the conversation away.

“Don’t tease me, Mahiru.”

“Fufu, I promise I wasn’t. But I’m sorry for making you wait. You must’ve been out there for a while.”

“I just didn’t want to interrupt your fun. Come on, let’s head home.”

“Okay. And thank you, everyone.”

“Whoa, it’s gettin’ hot in here! Whew~ whew~!” one of the girls cheered.

“No wonder people call you a clown when you do stuff like that…” another said.

“Wow, rude!”

Her energy had a different vibe from Chitose’s or Ayaka’s. She puffed out her cheeks, but she grinned brightly when her eyes met Mahiru’s.

“Bye-byeee~ see you tomorrow!” she waved.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Mahiru replied.

“Yeah, see you.”

Since they'd all be back at school the next day, there was no need for any drawn-out goodbyes. With a few light waves, Amane and Mahiru said their farewells, and the girls cheerfully waved back as the two of them left together.

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Amane had his worries, but the walk home wasn’t the time or place to bring them up. There was no telling who might overhear. So he waited until they were safely back in the apartment before casting a subtle glance at the girl beside him.

Mahiru, who had just stood up after neatly slipping off her shoes, looked as calm and composed as ever—or at least, that’s how it seemed to him.

“Mahiru—”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. See?”

She'd cut him off before he could even get the words out. Somehow, just hearing her name was enough for her to know exactly what he'd meant to say. Either he was an open book, or her instincts were razor sharp. It was probably a little of both.

Amane hesitated, unsure of how to respond. Mahiru just smiled and gave a small, carefree shrug, unbothered by his worries.

"You worry too much, Amane-kun… When you're overly considerate, it actually makes things harder for me. I start worrying about *you* instead."

"Oh… I'm really sorry. That kind of defeats the whole purpose."

"My goodness. You're such a thoughtful little worrywart," Mahiru huffed. "But that's part of why I love you," she added teasingly as she slipped into her slippers and padded off toward the bathroom.

Amane watched her go with a faint smile, his gaze lingering on the soft sway of her flaxen hair.

"Do I really come across as that much of a crybaby to you?" Mahiru asked later.

She had finished washing her hands and gargling like she always did, and now sat curled up on the sofa sipping a cup of tea she'd made.

Amane didn't have it in him to answer. He simply turned his eyes away from hers.

"Why look away?"

"Well…you might not be crying, but I know how you always bottle things up—and how it wears you down. Of course I'm going to worry."

For the most part, Mahiru never cried in front of anyone.

Maybe part of it was embarrassment, but more than that, she had an iron will when it came to hiding weakness. She didn't want to trouble anyone, and she refused to show vulnerability. She almost never cried, even in front of Amane.

Nothing had happened to make her cry lately, but that didn't mean she never got hurt.

If Amane had to name one flaw in her, it was how stubbornly she locked away her negative emotions. For Mahiru, concealing any trace of distress seemed like a matter of principle.

He could accept it if she didn't feel like talking. But if she was truly hurting, then letting it fester in her heart was the last thing he wanted for her. And if it were selfish to want her to share that pain with him…well, he'd live with that.

"I'm not going to let something that trivial get to me. Those girls don't know my life, and I had no reason to tell them more than I already did. It's not a problem."

"Is that right?"

"Refusing to answer at all would've just made things more suspicious. It's safer to give them just a small part of the truth, then withhold the rest."

"…If that's how you feel, then I won't say anything else. I'll stand back and watch over you."

"Please do."

If Mahiru were in pain or genuine distress, Amane wouldn't have been able to accept her words so easily. But right now, she only seemed a little off, like she had a small knot tugging at her heart.

Amane nodded, choosing to trust her and respect her boundaries.

"Honestly, you don't have to worry so much…" she said. "You know I take after my father, right? Just acknowledging that I do isn't enough to upset me—or make me cry."

"Well, yeah… If I had to guess, I'd say you're more like your dad. I only saw your mom for a second, so I can't say for sure, but still."

Amane had at least met Asahi, Mahiru's father, and spoken with him once. It hadn't been enough to fully get to know the man, but even from that short interaction, it was clear Mahiru took after him. From his gentle features and his calm, composed demeanor, there was no mistaking the blood connection.

On the other hand, Amane had only caught the briefest glimpse of her mother. They hadn't exchanged a single word. Still, it wasn't just a matter of appearances. The atmosphere around her felt completely different, almost like she belonged to another world entirely.

"I'm glad I take after my father. My mother's features are much sharper. If I'd inherited her looks, I probably would've made enemies left and right without even trying."

“She was beautiful, no doubt about that, but… yeah, she definitely gave off a bossy vibe. It felt like she might take direct eye contact as a challenge.”

“It’s easier to get by when you seem gentle. In that sense, I’m thankful to my father. I inherited the best parts of both of them.”

“…I see.”

“I think I’ve said this before, but I don’t hate everything about them. I’m grateful that woman gave birth to me. I’m grateful I never had to struggle financially. And I met Koyuki-san because of her. They still neglected me, but they never resorted to violence or verbal abuse. Then again…we hardly saw each other enough for them to even get the chance.”

The girl who once smiled through the pain, quietly breaking inside as she whispered, *“If I was going to be that much trouble, she could have just not had me,”* was now gone.

Amane felt a deep sense of relief, even joy, seeing how far she’d come.

But her self-mocking murmur about how absent her parents had been left him feeling an aching emotion he couldn’t quite put into words.

“Does my mother hate me more because I take after my father?”

The softly spoken question slipped from her lips, and Amane shut his mouth.

Ah… In the end, I only made her sad.

Amane let go of both his foolishness and his, in some degree, misplaced resentment toward Mahiru’s parents. As far as he could tell when he saw her, Mahiru’s mother, Sayo, didn’t want to bring outright harm to her.

“…I won’t pretend to know what your parents are thinking,” he said slowly. “But at the time, I didn’t get the feeling your mother *hated* you. It felt more like she wanted nothing to do with you.”

“That woman couldn’t care less about my father, let alone me. She told me outright not to bother her with pointless nonsense.”

“So basically…she doesn’t care about you whatsoever?”

“…Yes. That’s what it felt like. She never wanted to be a parent, but it’s not like she enjoyed being cruel either. Maybe being ignored was better than being hated, or abused, or smothered by an overbearing helicopter parent.”

She recalled her childhood memories with a small, resigned smile. Amane's heart ached just watching her.

She was the one who'd been hurt. Not him. He had no right to complain, and no excuse that would make his feelings more valid than hers.

"Well, whatever kind of people they are… the truth is, I am who I am now because of my past. I won't deny it."

"Yeah…"

"And I'm happy now. I don't think I could've come this far and experienced this happiness without everything I went through. All the pain and hardship shaped me, and because of that, I met you…and you came to love me."

"Right… If even one thing had gone differently, we wouldn't be here."

Meeting Mahiru, growing close to her, falling in love—it had all been possible because of the paths they'd taken.

Her road had been steep, harsh, and filled with shadows. But to wish it had been different would be to wish away the person she had become.

Amane could resent the suffering she'd endured. He *did* resent it. But he couldn't bring himself to say it was meaningless—not when that journey had led her to him, and brought them both happiness.

If Mahiru could look back and say she was happy now, then instead of cursing the past or blaming those who hurt her, Amane knew the better path was to protect the happiness they had now.

The past couldn't be changed.

But the future?

That was still theirs to build.

"Right?" Mahiru said with a small nod. "That's why I can accept having loveless parents. Nothing's going to change now, no matter what I do. The past can't be rewritten."

"Yeah."

"But still, they never acted like real parents. I can't acknowledge them as such. And objectively speaking, their behavior doesn't deserve to be recognized that way. To me, they don't even register as parents."

"You've got every right to feel that way. Your feelings are yours alone, and you don't need to feel guilty about it."

"…Thank you. That means a lot."

Amane understood. He could see why she couldn't think of them as parents, and believed she had every right to feel that way.

In his eyes, their actions were unforgivable. A parent had no right to trample on their child's happiness.

But it wasn't his place to step into her family matters—not yet. So he held those words back and kept them to himself.

"…Siblings, huh," Mahiru murmured. "It's probably for the best they never had another child. I can't imagine anyone born between those two ever having anything close to a happy family."

After a long pause, her thoughts drifted back to the conversation she'd had with her classmates earlier.

"…Families really are complicated. What does it mean to be a family? I don't think I know the right answer."

There was no pain in her voice. If anything, it sounded like the words had slipped out on their own, carrying with them a strange sort of relief.

That's why Amane didn't sugarcoat his response. He just said what he was thinking.

"I don't think there is one."

"Huh?"

Mahiru looked up at him, blinking. Whether she hadn't expected an answer or had simply been caught off guard by how he replied, she stared at him with a blank, almost childlike confusion on her face.

"I mean, maybe there isn't just one right answer."

Amane knew he was lucky. He'd grown up in a loving home, knowing he was loved and loving in return. But even with that, he never believed his family's way of doing things was the *only* way.

To him, there was no single, universal definition of what made a family "right."

"I think it's possible to look back and realize something *was* right, in hindsight—not the other way around. Telling yourself that a certain way is best and committing to it doesn't make it right. Every person in a family is a variable, and every family has its own equation. There's no one-size-fits-all

solution to tell us how a family should be. Every home has its own values, its own challenges…and its own answer that's right to them."

Amane was truly grateful for the family he had. But he'd also never call his experience the gold standard. He couldn't stand the mindset that only *one* version of family was valid and everything else was wrong. Those were his true feelings.

"I think it's something you figure out as you go," Amane said. "You make mistakes, try different paths…and search for what feels right. If you can look back someday and say, 'I'm glad this was my family,' then you know you succeeded. So no—I don't think there's only one right answer for what a family should be. But I *do* think there are definitely wrong ones."

Abusing a child. Mistreating a parent. Abandoning a family member. If some families considered these the right values to have, then to Amane, such families were already wrong. He couldn't accept it—and he wouldn't. He never tried to impose his values on others, but when he considered the kind of family he wanted to build one day, he realized there was no room for that kind of thinking.

"Mahiru, do you want to find a solution that looks perfect to everyone else?" he then asked gently.

"…I don't. Even if it's not perfect, I just want something that feels right to us. No one else gets to tell us it's wrong."

"See? You do get it."

When Amane gave a quiet, proud nod, he noticed the tension in Mahiru's expression ease just a little.

"If you're ever that worried, just talk to me. I don't really seem like the kind of guy who'd brush off a serious conversation, do I?"

"…No, you don't. You always listen, and you always stay by my side."

"Exactly. So I'll listen, and we'll figure things out together. We'll think it through, look at every option, and choose what feels right. And if we mess up…then we'll just find the next solution, together."

There would be times when they made the wrong call. Times when they'd stumble, face regrets, or make mistakes they couldn't undo. Life didn't come with a rewind button. You could only live it once.

But having someone by your side who chose you, who worried with you, changed everything. Even at their lowest, things wouldn't feel hopeless. And as long as they kept communicating, kept trying, they could still reach for the best outcome together.

"…That makes me feel better."

"Leave it to me; I'll put my not-so-brilliant brain to work."

"Geez, you don't have to keep putting yourself down."

This time, Mahiru finally showed Amane a genuine, amused laugh.

Seeing that, Amane smiled in relief.

Then, as if all the weight on her heart had finally lifted, Mahiru leaned gently against him. He welcomed her presence without a second thought.

Amane gently squeezed Mahiru's hand, enjoying her warmth and softness when she all of a sudden made a curious little sound.

"…Hmm? Was that…"

"What's wrong?" he asked, leaning in slightly to catch a better look at her face.

But she didn't answer. Instead, she stared at him in silence for a moment, then quickly turned her head away.

A faint blush had bloomed across her cheeks. Was it because they were still holding hands? Or…was it something else?

"…Actually, never mind. Pretend I didn't say anything."

"What? Pretend?"

"And please don't ask why."

"All right, all right. I won't ask if you don't want me to."

"That's no good either, you know. You should at least ask properly."

"Whaaaat…?"

"Hehe, I'm kidding… You don't have to ask, and I'm not going to tell. For now."

"*For now*, eh?"

"When I will all depends on you, Amane-kun."

Mahiru's eyes sparkled mischievously as she raised a finger to her lips to gesture a playful *shh*. Her sweet, teasing grin stopped Amane in his tracks.

Completely thrown off, he ran a hand through his hair, as if trying to rake the flustered thoughts right out of his head.

"Future me's got the weight of the world on his shoulders…"

"He really does."

Mahiru lit up with her brightest smile of the day, and for a moment, Amane was too stunned to speak.

Then, slowly, a soft smile formed on his lips.

As long as she's happy, he thought, *that's all that matters.*

Animate SS

Sweet and Spicy

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11 from the Animate Bookstore in Japan

Amane wasn't great with spicy food.

It wasn't that he couldn't handle the heat—he just didn't like it. Spicy dishes had never really appealed to him. Of course, he still ate the ones Mahiru made, but only because she toned down the spice and added a richness that made them genuinely enjoyable. It wasn't like he'd suddenly developed a taste for it.

He was pretty sure he'd told a certain girl that more than once.

"That girl… Does she think Scoville units measure *flavor* instead of *heat*?"

Amane had managed to swallow Chitose's so-called special chocolate—but just barely. He'd nearly spit it out on reflex, only to grit his teeth and force it down. The moment the chocolate hit his stomach, he slumped to the carpet in agony.

As the burning pain finally subsided, he lay flat on his back, frowning miserably as he reflected on the torment he'd just endured.

As a precaution, he'd downed some yogurt beforehand and kept a glass of milk within reach. But even then, this was the result. It took a special kind of talent to make something as sweet as chocolate taste obscenely spicy.

Letting out a groan so hoarse it could've come straight from the depths of hell, Amane somehow managed to lift his head.

Eyes watery from the heat, he turned to Mahiru, who had been watching him silently.

"*Spice equals PAIN!* Does she not get that!?!?"

"*I* get it," Mahiru replied calmly. "But I do think a little stimulation can

bring out a dish's flavor."

"There's gotta be a limit, though. Right?"

"…I'm not sure it helped much, but I did try to convince Chitose-san not to make it so strong it'd upset your stomach or leave a lingering burn. But…it's still *very* spicy."

"…Couldn't you have talked her into showing me a little mercy?"

"I did. These *are* the toned-down ones."

"I don't even want to imagine how spicy the originals were…"

He didn't dare picture whatever hellish concoction Chitose had whipped up in the first draft. Just the thought made a shiver crawl down his spine.

For some reason, Mahiru's gaze dipped slightly, a flicker of guilt passing through her eyes.

"…Just so you know, I added a little spice to some of my chocolate too."

"Wait, what? That's news to me!"

"Oh, they're not nearly as spicy as Chitose-san's. I used a bit of charred soy sauce and a touch of black pepper. It has a sweet-and-salty balance, with a subtle kick for a refreshing, layered flavor. Think of it as a mature, Japanese-inspired twist."

"Whew, okay. As long as we're not talking chili peppers or Sichuan peppercorns, I can live with that."

The way Mahiru explained it, it sounded a little unusual but perfectly reasonable—maybe even delicious.

If that's all it is, then I've got nothing to worry about… Amane thought, breathing a small sigh of relief.

But then he caught Mahiru turning her gaze just slightly away from him, a little *too* deliberately.

"Wait a second. Why'd you look away just now?"

"That was a joke. None of the chocolate I made this time is spicy. I wanted you to actually enjoy it."

"Please keep it that way next time, too."

Amane could tolerate a little spice, but it was never something he craved. Even if it earned major bonus points from being made by Mahiru, he'd grimace if it were too spicy.

That said, he knew Mahiru always cooked with him in mind. Chances

were, it wouldn't be overly spicy to begin with.

Still, after surviving Chitose's culinary assault, a gentle little warning felt justified.

"If you don't…"

"If I don't…?"

"I'll make your lips puff up too."

Spicy food could make your lips swell. So if Mahiru ever dared to serve something red hot, Amane figured it was only fair that she experienced a little *swelling* of her own.

"…Y-you can't. What if the swelling doesn't go down?"

"Hm. So it'd be fine if it's right before a day off?"

When he flashed her a gentle smile, Mahiru immediately grew far more flustered than she had earlier. Amane gently placed a finger beneath her chin, and her cheeks flushed with color, as if she'd just eaten something red hot herself.

I mean…she never said no or that she didn't want it, so…

Mahiru brought her hand up to cover her lips, but Amane softly brushed it aside.

Then, leaning in, he closed the space between them to take a taste for himself.

With a shy, resigned expression, Mahiru lowered her head gingerly, then quietly accepted the warmth of his breath as it met her own.

Bookwalker SS

When Shall I Visit Again?

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11 from Bookwalker Japan

"*Heh heh*."

An uncharacteristic chuckle escaped her lips, and a grin she couldn't stop tugged at her mouth.

Normally, her inner sense of decorum would've scolded her for giggling in such an indecent way. But just this once, even her ability to think straight had been seized.

The uncontrollable grin lingered on her face as she gently rolled onto her side. Still lying down, Mahiru held her phone up to shield her eyes from the overhead light, and the moment her beloved's face lit up the screen, her grin widened.

It was a photo taken earlier that day of Amane at work. She had permission, of course—both from Fumika, the owner, and Amane himself.

In the picture, Amane wore a gentle, professional smile different from the sweet one he usually gave her. He'd spent a lot of time practicing it, knowing how important it was to smile in customer service, and it showed. There wasn't the slightest trace of awkwardness in the soft expression he managed.

Amane himself wasn't all that convinced, but with his naturally handsome features, that waiter uniform and a smile made him look even more dashing than usual. He had the air of a warm, well-mannered young man anyone would naturally like.

Mahiru couldn't pretend it didn't bother her a little, knowing that smile was being shown to other women. But that was the nature of his job. And besides, she knew Amane would never look at anyone else. So for now, she was content simply watching over him.

He's just…so handsome.

She knew full well her feelings made her hopelessly biased, but even through that lens, Amane was undeniably dreamy. To her, he was utterly and completely wonderful. And now that he was finally wearing the uniform she'd been waiting so long to see, he shone even brighter.

The uniform complemented his tall frame, emphasizing his lean build. Even through the fabric, she could tell how athletic and well-defined his body was, thanks to his consistent muscle training. This made him look all the more stunning.

He had grumbled at first, claiming the uniform wore him and not the other way around, but now it looked perfect on him. There was even a touch of sophistication to the way he carried himself that never failed to catch Mahiru's eye.

If it were up to her, she'd come watch him work every single day. But of course, that would be intrusive. And skipping out on her own responsibilities was out of the question for someone like Mahiru. So, that little wish remained just that—a fleeting daydream.

Still, just seeing Amane in action this once gave her more than enough joy to get through the days ahead.

She would make do with that for now.

"I do plan to stop by again, eventually…but more importantly, I hope Amane-kun wasn't too worried by what happened."

Amane was prepared for Mahiru's visit, so he wasn't bothered by her watching him work. What worried him was whether the accidental spill had ruined Mahiru's day. On the other hand, Mahiru was more concerned about whether it made him feel awful.

There wasn't a single trace left of the stains that had ruined her clothes, and honestly, just getting to wear matching uniforms and take a photo together afterward more than made up for everything. Even so, Amane had still been worried. After they got home, he kept sneaking glances at her, quietly checking to see how she was feeling.

For Mahiru, the visit alone had been enough to set her heart racing. A little mishap like that wasn't nearly enough to ruin the experience. But Amane, as considerate a boyfriend as ever, had already offered, *"Let's plan a*

proper date another day," making sure she knew he still wanted to make it up to her. He was always looking out for her.

If anything, she'd already received more than enough for White Day. And yet here he was—giving her even more, not just today, but in the days ahead.

Mahiru fell in love with him all over again, and before she knew it, a loose, dopey smile had crept across her face.

I'm a lucky girl, aren't I…?

There weren't many people in the world who could show their love so openly through both words and actions. Mahiru had only ever found one.

It was Amane. Now and always.

She could practically hear the logical part of her brain sighing at how hopelessly smitten she looked, but she ignored that feeling. She looked at the photo again, replaying the lovely scene from today in her mind once more.

Gamers SS

"She's Picked Up Another Fetish, Hasn't She?" (Boyfriend's Comment)

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11 from the Gamers Bookstore in Japan

What am I supposed to get…

Itsuki let out a sigh as he wandered through the White Day pop-up stalls at the mall.

He'd gotten chocolates from a few girls on Valentine's Day, and of course, it was only right to return the favor. He'd been trying to pick out something thoughtful for each of them, but the one giving him the most trouble wasn't his girlfriend. It was her best friend, Mahiru.

She wasn't just his girlfriend's best friend, but also his best friend's girlfriend. That alone made Itsuki feel like he had to put extra thought into her gift. To make things even harder, Mahiru came across as a graceful and high-class girl, which made finding something that felt appropriate a real challenge.

According to Chitose, *"She's not picky about flavors, and she likes things that are cute or pretty."*

In other words, her tastes were so broad they were practically useless. That description could've fit just about anyone.

On top of that, if he got something too fancy, there was a chance it might make Mahiru uncomfortable. And more importantly, he definitely didn't want to risk outshining whatever she'd be getting from her actual boyfriend, Amane.

There was no way anything he chose would top a gift from her beloved boyfriend. But still, just in case, he wanted to get her something simple that would make her smile.

That said, Mahiru had always been a huge help to him. Between

everything she'd done for both Chitose and himself, Itsuki honestly felt like he owed her big time. If he could, he wanted to give her something she'd truly be happy to receive.

But if I go overboard…

And so the cycle repeated.

Caught in that endless loop, Itsuki kept circling the same display like a lost dog.

The White Day event space in the mall wasn't as elaborate as the Valentine's displays, but the shelves were neatly lined with rows of carefully arranged gifts. All around, men scanned the offerings with nervous, uncertain eyes.

Itsuki had been eyeing a box of cookies he thought Mahiru might like. It was a safe, can't-go-wrong pick. But considering how much he owed her, it just felt too plain. He wanted his gift to also express his gratitude for everything she'd done. If only he could find something she'd truly like.

And if I want to go down that route, then it obviously has to be about Amane.

When it came to Mahiru's tastes, Amane was the clear answer. But it wasn't like he could just give him to her.

For starters, Amane wasn't his to give, and he was basically Mahiru's already. Besides, if Itsuki even tried something like that, he could already hear Amane snapping at him, saying, *"Who the hell do you think you are?"*

Then he thought, *What about a photo…?*

But knowing how much Amane doted on Mahiru these days, she could easily get a photo just by asking him. Also, Itsuki already sent her candid shots of Amane from time to time just to amuse her, so it wouldn't be special enough to pass as a gift anymore.

So now what? he wondered, scrolling through his messages with Amane, hoping something would spark an idea. Suddenly, one particular line caught his eye.

"Lately, Mahiru's gotten into the habit of calling me before bed. You think she's picked up another weird fetish or something…?"

There it was.

"*Bingo*."

If a photo didn't have enough impact, then why not take a voice recording instead?

Chitose had mentioned that Mahiru seemed a little lonely now that Amane was tied up with his part-time job.

If there was even a chance he could ease that loneliness just a little, then there was no reason not to try.

Now that he'd made up his mind, the next step was figuring out what kind of recording would make her happiest. She already heard Amane's voice every day on calls and in person, so it had to be something she wouldn't normally get to hear.

For example, a recording of Amane saying things that would make her day. The kind of stuff Mahiru would never hear him say to her face.

How didn't I think of this sooner!? Itsuki thought the moment the idea clicked. Now that the pieces had finally fallen into place, he hurriedly gathered the rest of the gifts into his basket and made a beeline for the register.

First things first, he schemed, *I need to find a quiet spot where I can get Amane alone.*

Melon Books SS

A Precious Treasure That Will One Day Come

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11 from the Melon Books Bookstore in Japan

"Aren't babies just adorable?"

"*Hyaahh!?!?!*"

They had just finished dinner and were settling in for a break when Amane casually voiced the passing thought. Mahiru responded with an uncharacteristically high-pitched shriek.

Startled, Amane flinched and looked over at her.

She was staring at him, wide-eyed and frozen in place.

"Uh, what? What's wrong?" he asked

"Th-that's what I should be asking *you!* Why would you say that out of nowhere!?"

"I mean, I had work today, right? A customer came in with their kids…and one of them was a baby. I just happened to play with them a bit, that's all."

He hadn't meant anything by the remark. It was just something that had happened earlier in the day.

It was their day off from school, and he'd been scheduled for an afternoon shift at work. During a lull between rushes, a customer came in with their child, and all the staff couldn't help but smile as they waited on them.

There weren't any other customers around, so they let the parent take their time, figuring they could use a break after the nonstop demands of childcare. As Amane passed by, the baby had taken a sudden liking to his apron, and he'd found himself roped into playing along.

"Babies are so tiny and squishy, aren't they?" he said. "The one I saw

today grabbed onto my apron with all its might, but I could barely feel it. Just made me realize how delicate they are…"

The baby had squealed in delight as they clutched at the hem of his apron, fascinated by how it swayed. Judging by the mother's flustered, apologetic tone, Amane figured that if he tried to pull away, it probably would've ended in a full-blown crying fit. So he stayed, letting the kid hold on a little longer.

While he was there, Amane had listened as the mother talked about how exhausting raising a child could be—and how, despite it all, children were still a blessing.

When the baby gently latched onto his finger, he was amazed by how tiny and fragile they were. It really hit him how much babies needed protecting.

"It was just so cute, you know?" he then said. "Kinda made me wonder if I was ever like that too."

"You were suuuper duper adorable when you were little. Absolutely precious."

Amane looked Mahiru in the eyes. "Oi."

"…That was just a guess."

"That was most definitely *not* just a guess."

There's no way she'd know unless someone leaked the pics…

Without a word, Amane reached out and gave Mahiru's puffed-up cheeks a firm but gentle pinch, punishing her for that smug little grin.

"I'm sowrryyy…!" came her muffled apology through squished lips.

Letting out a sigh, Amane finally released her plush, stretchy cheeks.

Freed at last, Mahiru immediately pressed her hands to the tender spots, as if trying to smooth her face back into shape.

"You even have my baby pictures… Don't you love me a little too much, Mahiru?"

"I could say the same to you, Amane-kun. You're always so open with your love. Just the other day, you hugged me in your sleep and mumbled, 'I love you,' remember?"

"Mahiru, how about I give those cheeks another round?"

"I think I'll pass, thank you very much~"

With a quick step back, Mahiru put some distance between them, and Amane shrugged his shoulders slightly.

Once she realized he wasn't going to turn her cheeks into mochi again, she visibly relaxed. Still clutching a cushion to her chest, Mahiru peeked at him from behind it, her face half-hidden.

"…Do you like babies, Amane-kun?" she whispered demurely.

"Hm? Yeah, of course I do. They're adorable, and I always get this instinct to protect them. I mean, they're a family's treasure, right? Whether it's your own baby or someone else's."

"O-oh, really…?"

Amane cocked his head slightly, not quite sure why she was asking something so obvious.

Mahiru gave a faint nod, her eyes drifting elsewhere, then buried her face deeper into the cushion in her arms.

Suruga-ya SS

Until Fate Tears Us Apart

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 11 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore in Japan

"You usually get two king oyster mushrooms in a pack, right?"

Amane spoke casually as he unloaded the groceries into the fridge. He and Mahiru had just come back from their grocery run, and now he held up a pack of mushrooms, eyeing them thoughtfully.

Most of the refrigerated items were already stashed away, but since they planned to use the mushrooms later, he'd left them out on the counter. Still, something about them made him pause.

"Yes, you do," Mahiru replied.

"And sometimes they toss in a third one to even out the weight, right?"

"They do."

He held up the tray with three mushrooms lined in a neat little row.

"They kind of look like a little family. I thought that was cute," he said.

"Hehe, then maybe the small, thin one is the mom, and the super tiny one is the child?"

There was a big one, a slender one, and tucked between them, a smaller one still. Each was a different size, and together they had this oddly endearing vibe.

They'd grabbed the pack on a whim at the store, but now that he looked at them properly, Amane found it strangely heartwarming how much they resembled a tiny, happy family.

"But that means we're about to slaughter this whole family…" Amane said.

"Don't say that. You ruined the wholesome moment."

Mahiru shot him an unimpressed look, the kind that screamed, *"Why would you even go there?"* even though she was the one who'd planned to

cook them in the first place.

They weren't about to abandon dinner over a sudden bout of animism, but now that they'd imagined a little family in those mushrooms, they felt a weird emotion they couldn't quite explain.

"May this family rest in peace…in our stomachs," Amane joked.

"But…if we split the dish between us, wouldn't that mean they'll be separated forever?"

"Okay, now *you're* the one being dark."

"W-well…"

Amane turned to the mushrooms in his hand and whispered, "Let's be honest…isn't Mahiru the meaner one?"

Mahiru didn't say a word. But the way her lips pressed into a silent little pout made her displeasure crystal clear.

"Hear that? We're about to commit gruesome mass *shroomicide*…" Amane muttered.

"That sounds terrible! Both the wording and the delivery!"

"Guess that makes us partners in crime. We're bound by the same fate now."

We take lives to eat every day, Amane thought. *This is nothing new.*

With a casual shrug, he set the mushrooms down and glanced over at Mahiru. She was still pouting, staring at him like she was trying to decipher something.

"When you don't say anything, it just makes it seem like my joke flopped. I mean, it did, but still. Sorry."

"…'Bound by the same fate,' huh?"

"Sure we are. We're about to devour an entire family and erase the evidence."

"I see."

"...Are you mad?"

"Why would I be? Shroomicide aside, I actually thought the second half of what you said was kind of sweet. So let's make sure we give them a proper send-off by enjoying every bite."

"Yeah, let's do that."

"All settled, then."

Mahiru gave a firm little nod as she washed her hands, a soft smile blooming across her face. The sudden shift in her mood made Amane tilt his head, puzzled. Still unsure what had sparked her cheerfulness, he quietly followed her lead.

"…You're in a good mood all of a sudden, huh?"

"Am I?" Mahiru said, then paused. "…Maybe I am."

"What's with the mood swing?"

"It's nothing."

Of course, whenever Mahiru said *"nothing,"* it almost never actually was. But with her smile looking even brighter than usual, Amane figured it couldn't be anything bad.

Pushing for answers would probably just earn him a scolding, so he let it go and smiled.

Afterword

Author's Message

Thank you so much for picking up this book.

I'm Saeki-san, your author. Did you enjoy the eleventh volume of *The Angel Next Door?*

This time, the story picks up right after Valentine's Day, covering White Day, before touching on the start of spring break…the final stretch before exam season begins for students preparing for university.

And yes, after Valentine's Day comes…the end-of-term exams.

For Amane-kun back in his first year, that was the unavoidable event on his mind long before he could even afford to think about Valentine's.

Why do students have to take test after test, anyway...? It's basically hell…

I'm sure some of you reading this are still students, and honestly, I think you're amazing. There's no way I could sit down and study like that now... It'd be impossible for me. So keep up the hard work! You're doing great!

Now, back to the main story. Despite everything, our main characters spend ample time studying, whether it's reviewing together as a group or quietly focusing on their own work. Both Amane and Mahiru are naturally diligent students, so they don't complain or drag their feet. They willingly put their heads down to learn. I wish I had that same work ethic.

For White Day, Amane-kun invites Mahiru-san to his part-time job as his return gift. I'm sure she was super thrilled and grinning from ear to ear. Her smile that day had to be brighter than usual.

There's a little hint in the story that Amane might be popular, but it's not like he's *super* popular or anything. At most, there might be a few girls

who think, “Maybe I’ll start showing up just to see him.” Of course, those girls would probably feel devastated the second they found out he has a girlfriend.

Miyamoto and Oohashi are watching over him a bit nervously. And funnily enough, Amane is watching them just as nervously, wondering, *“When are they finally going to get together…?”* Maybe they will. Maybe they won’t.

As for what happened between Oohashi and Miyamoto in the previous volume… That’s a story for another day. I probably won’t write much about it in the main storyline.

And toward the end, there was a premonition of trouble brewing… Or was there? Who knows. But it seems like there’s a storm on the horizon, so please look forward to the next volume.

Once again, I had the pleasure of receiving more wonderful illustrations from Hanekoto-sensei!

Hehehe… First we got Mahirun in a maid outfit, and now she’s rocking a waiter uniform… What a treat for the eyes! Mahirun looks adorable in frilly clothes, of course, but she pulls off a pants look just as well… Getting to see kinds of “what-if” visuals makes me so happy. I really wish we could see her standing next to Amane… If a café had employees like them, I’d be there every day…!

Also, I always have fun spotting the angel wing motif on each cover. Did you find it this time?

This is super personal, but when it comes to Hanekoto-sensei’s illustrations, of course, the characters are cool, cute, and just plain wonderful—I love them, obviously!—but I’m also obsessed with the backgrounds. They make it feel like Mahiru and the others are really there, living in those scenes. It’s like the illustrations are alive, like they truly exist there. They just breathe life. Every time we get a new one, I can’t stop grinning. I especially adore the way the light is drawn. I love *everything*. I’m running out of words to use.

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who helped bring this book to life.

To my dedicated editor, the entire GA Bunko editorial team, the sales department, the proofreaders, Hanekoto-sensei, the printers, and, of course, everyone who picked up this book. Sincerely, thank you all!

I hope we'll meet again in the next one.

Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end!

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

I hope you enjoyed! Indi writing.

Thank you for reading our translation! This time, the editing phase took much longer than usual due to personal issues, but I'm quite happy with how it turned out!

I'd like to thank ***aritakun***, ***Trevor***, ***Uzumi Kum***, and ***Dil*** for raws and sending pics of the *Animate*, *Melon Books*, *Gamers*, and *Suruga-ya* bookstore short stories!

Massive thanks to ***Zel***, our accuracy checker, and to ***Tipsy***, ***Dil***, and ***existence is pain***, and everybody following the chapter-by-chapter releases on the discord server for helping proofread this volume!

If you enjoyed our translation, please consider sending us a heartfelt message over at ***discord.gg/otonari***. Once again, thank you very much for reading our fan translation!

Below is the current timeline for the main story:

Vol. 1: High School 1st year — *October → December*
Vol. 2: High School 1st year — *January → April*
Vol. 3: High School 2nd year — *April → May*
Vol. 4: High School 2nd year — *May → June*
Vol. 5: High School 2nd year — *June → July/August*
Vol. 6: High School 2nd year — *July/August → September*

Vol. 7: High School 2nd year — *September → Late October*
Vol. 8: High School 2nd year — *Late October → November 8th*
Vol. 9: High School 2nd year — *November → Dec 6th*
Vol. 10: High School 2nd year — *Dec 7th → Feb 14th*
Vol. 11: High School 2nd year — *Feb 14th → End of March*

The next volume is confirmed to be **Vol. 11.5**! The release date has been confirmed for ***September 13th, 2025***.
Vol. 11 final word count: 64,131.

Don't forget to support the series in other ways!

See the Fan Translator Page at the beginning for the relevant hyperlinks, and please purchase the official English Translation by ***Yen Press*** once available in your country. As of this translation, they have English translations up to Volume 8.5, with Volume 9 set to release December 9th! I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

Note: This fan translation is NOT for sale, nor should it serve as an alternative to purchasing the official translations in the future. If you paid for this translation, please seek a refund.